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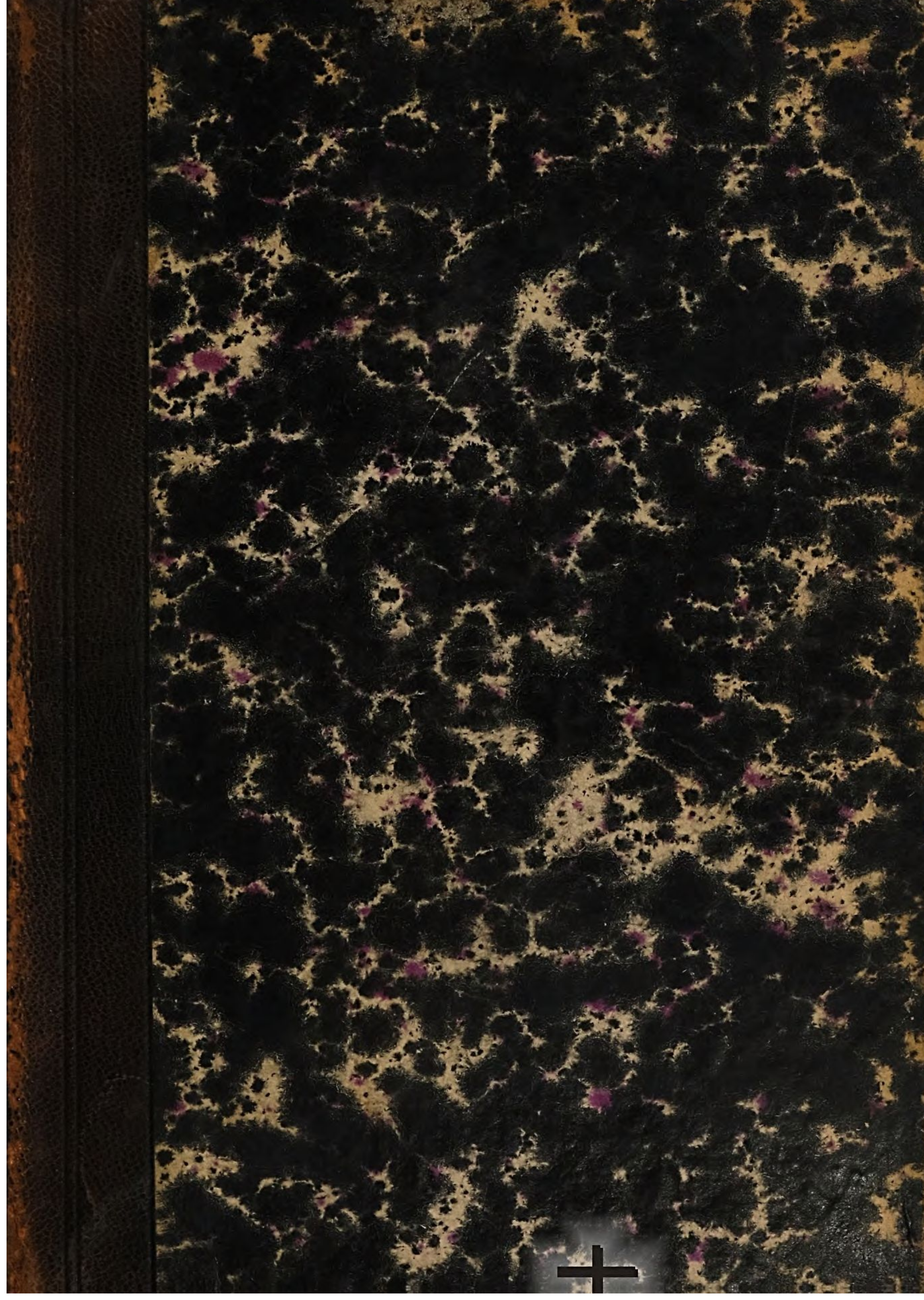
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MAJOR AND MINOR BY W. E. NORRIS.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. 2.

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MAJOR AND MINOR.

BY

W. E. NORRIS,

AUTHOR OF "MY FRIEND JIM," "A BACHELOR'S BLUNDER,"

ETC. ETC.

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1887.

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MAJOR AND MINOR.

CHAPTER I.

OUT OF THE DEPTHS.

ON the evening of his return to Duke Street Brian walked round to his club, where a number of letters, many of which had been forwarded from Beckton months before, were handed to him. The first that he opened was from the club secretary, and contained a formal reminder that his subscription was overdue; the second was from Messrs. Berners, enclosing their little account for music published; two others were small bills which he had forgotten; then there were some business communications from the lawyers, and finally, a kindly, scolding letter from Mr. Potter himself, who wrote:

“Where you are I cannot discover, and evidently your brother does not know, since the only address that he is able to give me is that of your club. Although he has not told me so, I gather that you are not in receipt of any allowance from him, and your own resources must have been exhausted long ago. Now, will you, my dear boy, do me the favour to re-

member that I was your father's friend, though he did try to quarrel with me sometimes, and will you, if these lines reach you, look in at the office some morning and talk your position over with me? It may be that you are earning a living for yourself, but I cannot think that likely, and I greatly fear that you are in want. You have no right to be in want when you own a property which would realise enough, if disposed of, to make you easy; and you ought not to consider yourself bound by a wish which your poor father certainly would not have expressed if he could have foreseen its effect upon you. Your brother, as you probably know, has been less scrupulous, with a good deal less excuse. I would wager a moderate sum that you haven't so much as given a thought to the expenses which attach to the mere possession of the Manor House. Your brother, I believe, has up to now paid the wages of the old couple who live in it, and I suppose the Beckton gardeners look after the grounds as formerly. In short, you have practically no choice but to sell the place, although I should not advise your doing so immediately, as, from what I hear, it is likely to increase rather than to diminish in value, owing to the extension of building which will shortly be taken in hand in its vicinity. Meanwhile I hope you will allow me to be your banker."

If Mr. Potter had known his correspondent a little better, he would assuredly have omitted that reference to Gilbert's disregard of the trust reposed in him. Brian read the words with the deepest indignation and shame, and the sensible counsel contained in the remainder of the letter was wholly thrown away upon him by reason

of them. All his old resentment against his brother, which had cooled down to a great extent during the months that had elapsed since he had left home, blazed up again with redoubled force. It galled him to think that Gilbert was defraying expenses which, as the old lawyer had rightly surmised, he had failed to take into account; but he could only resolve that the debt should be paid off as soon as possible, and that the Manor House should never fall under the control of such a traitor while he had two arms to work with.

A pair of well-developed arms may, no doubt, be considered a serviceable possession, the only conditions necessary to render them so being, firstly, that they should have been trained to perform some special kind of work, and, secondly, that the said work should be provided for them. It was Brian's misfortune, not his fault, that his arms were of little use, except for organ-playing purposes, and that nobody at that particular moment appeared to want an organist. Luck often seems to fall to those who are already lucky, and wealth to those who are already rich. It must be assumed that Brian's evil star was in the ascendant at this time, for he could get no bid for his services, modest as was the price that he placed upon them. His friend Phipps, too, as he learnt from the hall-porter at the club, had gone to Italy, leaving the date of his return uncertain, so that the scores which had been prepared for his inspection had to be laid aside. Finally, Mr. Berners, while acknowledging with thanks the receipt of the amount due to him, regretted that he must report a complete failure in the sale of Mr. Segrave's charming and original compositions. He gave many

reasons for this, which might have been found consolatory by some composers; but Brian, who wanted money and not reasons, found them a little beside the mark.

Poverty is not exactly a crime, but it is necessary, as we all know, to treat paupers very like criminals, in order to discourage the others, and although Brian was not yet reduced to craving relief at the hands of the parochial authorities, a time came when he fared scarcely better than if he had been brought to that dismal strait. To remain in Duke Street was out of the question. He removed himself and his belongings one day to a little room in a side street in Westminster, where he had seen a ticket up, and where the tipsy, slatternly landlady was willing to let him live or die, as the case might be, without interference of any kind. There was a pawnbroker's shop hard-by, whither he betook himself on the morning after his change of quarters, and whence he presently emerged, with a guilty, hang-dog air, leaving his watch behind him. As for food, he found, upon calculation, that he could exist for about a month by means of restricting himself to one meal a day, and even from that, which he partook of at a greasy eating-house, he generally rose feeling half-famished. Every morning he sallied forth mechanically in search of employment, walking many miles to answer this or that advertisement, and every evening he returned, defeated and worn-out in body and spirit. Once, hurrying down Pall-Mall, he almost ran into the arms of Sir Hector Buckle, who came swinging out of the War Office with a red face and his umbrella over his shoulder. Brian instinctively lowered his head; but

indeed he need not have felt alarmed, for by this time he was a very shabby and disreputable-looking young man, with a broken hat and holes in his boots—a young man whom no respectable person would have been likely to recognize. Sir Hector, who may have been having an unsatisfactory interview with the authorities, passed on, muttering, “Confound you, sir! why can’t you look where you are going?” and for one moment poor Brian felt a desperate inclination to follow him. He was so desolate and wretched; the sound of a friendly voice would have been so welcome, and a five-pound note of such inestimable value! But he put the temptation away from him with a sort of shudder and hastened off, not daring to think too much about it.

Another, and in some ways a more painful encounter was in store for him. One afternoon, when he was wearily crossing the road close to Buckingham Palace, on his return from the customary fruitless expedition, he was within an ace of being knocked down by a carriage which dashed through the iron gates that lead to the Mall. The coachman shouted angrily at him; he sprang back, and the carriage swept past. A lady, beautifully dressed, who was seated in it, with her head in the air, threw a careless glance at him and then looked away. It was Beatrice Huntley. Of course she had not recognized him, and he did not for a moment imagine that she had; yet, somehow or other, her contemptuous indifference cut him to the heart. He stood gazing after her until the carriage disappeared, and then broke into a laugh which ended in something not unlike a sob. “What a fool I am!” he exclaimed aloud. “I am in love with a woman who would draw her skirts

away if I passed too close to her on the pavement. She will fulfil her destiny, I suppose, and marry some great swell, and I shall fulfil mine by dying like a rat in a drain."

The truth was that he was suffering from a badly nourished body, and from a brain which consequently was out of gear. That he should die of hunger, or even allow himself to fall into the extremity of poverty, rather than break an engagement into which he had really never entered, was preposterous; and if his faculties had been unclouded, he must have seen that it was so. But he was incapable of reasoning, and indeed of thinking to any purpose. He had a dim notion that the sale of the Manor House was a subject upon which he must not suffer his mind to dwell. He would not call on Mr. Potter because he felt that he had no strength for argument; and so he plodded stupidly on, thinking that if there were any justice in heaven or on earth, some way out of his difficulties would eventually be provided for him.

One hardly knows whether it would be consolatory or the reverse to believe that only the unrighteous are driven to beg their bread. Either way, the theory would be a somewhat difficult one to maintain in the face of daily experiences. Brian Segrave's misfortunes, it may be conceded, were of his own creating; only, as he was honestly convinced that they were not, a day came at length when hope and faith alike deserted him and he found himself confronted by a temptation far worse than that to which he was so determined not to yield. He had always thought, as most people think, that suicide, apart from any question of morality, is a

coward's remedy; he had believed, as probably most people believe, that under no imaginable circumstances would it occur to him to take his own life. But his present circumstances were such as had hitherto been barely imaginable to him, and he was beginning to feel that they were also unendurable. A general who has staked the issue of a campaign upon a battle is almost expected to court death when he knows that he has lost that battle. At any rate, nobody thinks the worse of him for so doing; and though a distinction may be drawn between the bullet of the enemy and the bullet of your own revolver, the distinction is more obvious than the difference. Brian, having lost his battle, and being thoroughly sick of life, took to wandering down towards Westminster Bridge after dark and watching the black flood of the river from the embankment as it swept seawards. It was a dangerous habit for a half-starved man to contract.

Yet, as matters fell out, that dangerous habit of his proved the saving of him. For one evening, as he was leaning over the parapet, gazing down at the water and wondering how long it would take to drown, and whether he would be fool enough to strike out when he felt himself sinking, a certain parson, who was hastening homewards after holding a mission service on the south side of the river, caught sight of him and paused to see what the dejected-looking young man in the shabby clothes would do next. This parson had had a good many years' experience of London life and London misery; his practised eye could tell almost at a glance to which division of the great army of the destitute and despairing a given unit belonged, and he perceived,

what Sir Hector Buckle and Miss Huntley had failed to perceive, that the figure with its back turned towards him was that of a gentleman in extremities.

Presently the subject of his scrutiny took off his hat and laid it down upon the parapet beside him. The gesture is said to be a significant one; it was, at all events, enough for the parson, who advanced at once and, gripping the other's shoulder, called out sharply—

“Now, you sir, what are you about here?”

Brian wheeled round and saw, with as little surprise as one feels at impossible meetings in a dream, the man who of all others was most likely to be of service to him at this critical moment of his life.

“Monckton, old fellow,” he said quietly, “I can't do it. I haven't the pluck, or I haven't the cowardice—I don't know which it is.”

Then a sudden dizziness overcame him; the ground seemed to be rising and falling; his sight grew dim, and for a time he was delivered from his troubles quite as effectually as if he had been at the bottom of the Thames.

When he came to himself, he was lying on his back on the floor of a chemist's shop; Monckton and a policeman were bending over him, and, as he opened his eyes, the latter remarked—

“*He's* all right, sir. Had a bit of a fit, that's all. Just what I told you.”

“Excuse me, constable,” broke in the chemist, a little bald-headed man in blue spectacles, “that was my view of the case, not yours. I said at once, ‘This is a seizure, due to failure of the heart's action, which may have been brought about by a variety of causes.’ *You*

said drink. It is what members of the force invariably do say, and I must warn you that the assumption is a highly reprehensible one."

The chemist and the policeman had a little altercation over this, in the course of which Brian rose to his feet and was surprised to find that his legs would not support him. He dropped into a chair, and Monckton gave him some brandy and water; soon after which he found that he was being driven away in a cab, with his friend beside him.

"You are not to speak," Monckton said. "You are coming home with me, and when you have recovered yourself a little you can talk as much as you like. There's no hurry."

In truth, Brian had neither desire to speak nor power to think. He was only vaguely conscious of having been delivered from a great peril, and was willing to do as he was told by one in whom he had always placed implicit trust. But when he had been restored with some decently cooked food and a pint of champagne he felt another man, and was able to give some account of himself. Monckton, who was well-off, had a flat in Victoria Street, where he lived when in London, and which contained a spare bedroom. This he insisted that Brian should occupy, and, indeed, the latter would have been sent off to bed at once if he had not resisted.

"There's nothing the matter with me," he declared. "To speak plainly, I fainted from hunger as much as from anything else, and I'm as sound as possible again now, thanks to you. I'll tell you what; if you had such a thing as a tobacco-jar on the premises, you might let

me have a pipe and a talk with you. I shan't sleep comfortably on any other terms."

So Monckton gave him what he wanted, and listened to him while he told his tale. The two friends discoursed together until the night was far advanced. Perhaps, as their conversation was of a strictly private nature, it may be as well not to intrude upon it. For the purposes of this narrative it is sufficient to say that Monckton had no difficulty in overcoming the obstinacy which had resisted Mr. Potter's appeal. We are all apt to sneer at those who make unconditional surrender of their private judgment to a fellow-creature; and yet that would be by far the wisest thing that most of us could do if only we were acquainted with a fellow-creature better and wiser than ourselves. It was Brian's good fortune to possess such an acquaintance, and his merit to be aware of it. With a good deal of what Monckton said to him he was able to agree, and in the rest he was able at least to acquiesce.

"The long and the short of it is then that the Manor House must go," he observed at length with a sigh.

"It seems to me that you will have to sell the place," answered Monckton. "It is a pity, of course, but you have a perfect right to part with it, and, indeed, for the matter of that, I think you would be wrong not to part with it."

Brian sighed again. "I don't believe I shall ever have the heart to go back to Kingscliff," he said. "I shouldn't so much mind about the land that Gilbert has sold, if it weren't for the treason of the thing—very well, then; I won't call him any more bad names.

I say, I don't so much care about that; I always used to wish that the poor, dear old governor himself could be persuaded to make a little money in the same way. But to think of the Manor House being razed to the ground and the abomination of Buswellism standing in its place! Oh, it's quite enough to think of it; I would rather remain in exile than look upon such a sight."

"It doesn't necessarily follow that the Manor House will have to be pulled down," Monckton remarked.

"Oh yes, it does. When Gilbert wanted to buy it from me and offered me such a long price for it, I half suspected his intentions, and now I haven't a doubt about them."

"But you are not bound to sell the property to your brother."

"If I sold it to Buswell, the result would be the same, I suppose."

"No doubt; but there is the chance of your meeting with a purchaser who would keep the house as a residence. I think your best plan would be to instruct your lawyers to sell, but to explain that you would take less from such a person than you would from Mr. Buswell or any other speculator."

Brian smiled and shook his head. "I'll do so, if you think it worth while; but it's only a thousand to one chance."

"Such as it is, you may as well allow yourself the benefit of it. Of course, you can't expect to be paid to-morrow, or next day; so you must let me supply you with pocket-money in the meantime, and I hope you'll stay on here and keep me company as long as I am in London."

"Well," said Brian, "it's a relief at all events to think that I shall be able to pay you. You've been awfully good to me, Monckton. I wish I could do something for you in return."

"If you really want to do something to please me, you can let bygones be bygones and make friends with your brother again."

Brian nodded, but looked a little gloomy over it. "There has been no actual quarrel between us, you know," he observed. "I don't intend to hurl reproaches at him, but I can't say that I think he has behaved well either to me or to my father."

"No; you can't say that, I admit. But you can say nothing at all, and you can forgive. This evening you were not very far from committing a worse crime than your brother has been guilty of, and I suppose you fully expect to be pardoned for it."

"Is Gilbert to get off scot-free then?"

"Yes; so far as you are concerned. I want you to forgive him freely and to let it be as if he had never offended against you at all. Nothing short of that will satisfy your conscience, you'll find."

"Well, it's rather a pill, Monckton; but I'll try," answered Brian.

It did occur to him that his mentor's system would be a somewhat impossible one to carry out to its logical conclusion, and he was half tempted to ask him whether, if he were wrongfully dispossessed of property to which he had a good legal title, he would or would not bring an action against the trespasser; but he believed, as has been said, that his friend knew better than he did, and this belief restrained him from the utterance of captious

objections. Whatever Monckton might have done in the above supposititious case, it will be admitted by most people that his advice to Brian was right and sound, and that the latter was wise in deciding to follow it. And so our hero went to bed, having passed through the darkest day of his life.

CHAPTER II.

IN PARK LANE.

THE work of the world is for the most part done by people of whom nobody ever hears. The political machine and the social machine are under the ostensible control of personages who are well to the front; but these brilliant beings would be sorely perplexed and the machinery would soon come to a standstill but for such experienced, unambitious and unobtrusive members of society as Sir Joseph Huntley. Sir Joseph had sat in Parliament for a matter of fifteen years, and had perhaps addressed the House some twenty times in the course of that period. He was an invaluable man for committees; he had served on many Royal Commissions; whatever he had to do was always done thoroughly, if rather slowly; and he was considered to have strong claims upon his party. He was, however, extremely good-natured, by no means pushing, and entirely devoid of eloquence; and these, of course, were so many excellent reasons why his claims should be ignored.

In private life he enjoyed a certain popularity. Those who possess immense wealth, are given to hospitality, and are connected by marriage with the chief territorial

families in the kingdom, must be afflicted with some singularly unpleasant personal qualities if they are to escape a certain popularity. Sir Joseph was not so afflicted; but when that much had been said for him there really was not a great deal more to say. During the winter the members of the local hunt saw him on an average once a week—a thick-set, middle-aged man, with a round, good-humoured face, and short reddish whiskers; a man who knew where most of the gates were, and was not above asking when his information was at fault. At the great shoots which took place periodically on his estate he was wont to be present with a walking-stick in his hand, and was content to applaud the prowess of others. The remainder of his time he spent in the congenial and entrancing study of blue books. In London, when he was not at the House, or reading the newspapers at the Carlton, or taking his daily canter in Rotten Row, he was generally occupied in dodging his wife's guests. As he had a very large house, and as nobody particularly wanted to catch him, these manœuvres were seldom unsuccessful. "How it has come to pass that Joseph is my brother, and that I am Joseph's sister, is one of those inexplicable mysteries in the presence of which the brain reels," Miss Huntley would sometimes say.

Lady Clementina fully concurred. Lady Clementina thought it would be no bad thing if Beatrice were a little more like Joseph; and what Lady Clementina thought it was her custom to say. That, perhaps, was why her popularity was somewhat less than her husband's, although her notoriety was so much greater. She differed from Sir Joseph in that she was a de-

cidedly ambitious woman; she resembled him in being hopelessly conventional and orderly in her ideas. Ambition and conventionality rarely pull well together, and Lady Clementina's aspirations, which were many, seldom managed to fulfil themselves. She aspired, amongst other things, to be a leader of society, but knew—and was deeply mortified by the knowledge—that she had never attained to that proud position. Her wish, in truth, was to lead at all times and in all places, and had she succeeded in doing so, her character would doubtless have been an amiable one: for she loved those who submitted to her ruling. But she did not and could not succeed, lacking the necessary qualifications for leadership. Her father, the old Duke of Devonport, who had not been a very rich man, had spent the last years of his life in comparative retirement, leaving the hospitalities of Devonport House to be dispensed by his son and his daughter-in-law, and inviting as few people as possible to stay with him in the country. Thus Lady Clementina had seen little of fashionable society in her youth, and when she had entered it, somewhat late in life, as the wife of Sir Joseph Huntley, had been unable to pick up its tricks of speech and manner. Also, being by nature busy and energetic, and having consorted almost exclusively with her inferiors, she had acquired patronising and dictatorial ways which nobody liked, and which not a few persons hated. She spent her husband's money liberally, and upon the whole, judiciously. She entertained on a truly magnificent scale; her charities were numerous and regulated with due discrimination; she took a sincere and active interest in everybody's affairs,

from those of her servants upwards. But her servants wished that she would leave them alone; her relations would never consent to meet her in private, if they could possibly avoid it; and though hosts of people dined and danced in her house all the season through, very few of them had a good word for her. Her attempt to set up a political *salon* failed ignominiously.

All this, together with the fact that she had no children, gave Lady Clementina's disposition a tinge of acerbity and disappointment, perceptible in the ring of her voice, in the movements of her tall, angular person, in the set of her rather thin lips, the restlessness of her faded blue eyes, and the two perpendicular lines which rose from the bridge of her hook nose to the fringe of yellowish-brown hair which concealed her forehead. With her sister-in-law she had never been able to get on at all. The girl, according to her view, was wilful, fanciful, and by no means as respectful as she should be. She had ideas of her own upon all sorts of subjects, propriety included; and the worst of it was that, being of age, she had it in her power to put them into practice. And a pretty beginning she had made by going off to a watering-place for the whole winter, with an ex-dancing mistress for her companion! Nevertheless, Lady Clementina meant to be very kind to Beatrice; and just now it was her purpose to insure Beatrice's happiness as well as that of Lord Stapleford, a young cousin of her own, by arranging a marriage between the pair. Lord Stapleford wanted money rather badly, and if Beatrice did not want a home and an indulgent husband, the more shame for her; because assuredly she ought to want both.

On the evening of Miss Huntley's arrival in Park Lane she had to listen to a lengthy harangue, delivered in Lady Clementina's high-pitched, slightly querulous voice, and constructed with that careful attention to detail which had rendered her ladyship the terror of the charity committees, mothers' meetings, and other assemblages where she presided over the deliberations of her sex. Beatrice submitted to be lectured, answered to the best of her power the thousand and one questions put to her about her manner of life at Kingscliff and the acquaintances that she had formed there, and, at the expiration of an hour, candidly avowed her motive for displaying a meekness which could hardly be accounted as one of her natural attributes.

"I knew all this would have to come sooner or later," she remarked, "so I thought I would take it in the lump. May I be permitted to observe that you require a very long time to say a very simple thing, Clementina? When your homily is boiled down and the essence of it is extracted, it seems to amount to nothing more nor less than, 'Keep your eye on your sister-in-law, and your sister-in-law will pull you through.'"

"I suppose," said Lady Clementina, "that that is a quotation from some refined source or other which my ignorance prevents me from recognizing. I dare say it expresses what I mean quite accurately enough for the purpose. I certainly do think that you would be wiser to place yourself at least nominally under my care until you marry, and I certainly do not think that it is advisable for a girl of your age to go rushing about the country with a superannuated ballet-dancer by way of a chaperon."

"Nothing could be truer or more prettily put," answered Beatrice. "Of course I have been rushing about the country for the last six months, not living at a quiet little west-country watering-place, as some of my friends supposed; and it is notorious that Miss Joy was the star of the ballet until she was driven to seek other employment by the weight of years. Clementina, do you propose to go on like this? You can, if you like; only, if you do, you will drive me away. Whether that would be a misfortune for either of us I am not quite sure; but I will admit that I don't want to be driven away. I want to enjoy my season and to go about a good deal, and I am quite aware that I can't do that without your support. All the same, I would rather sacrifice my prospect of amusement than be bullied."

"You are very peremptory," said Lady Clementina. "Your brother and I wish you to enjoy yourself, and I shall be most happy to take you about; but really I cannot promise to act as your chaperon and at the same time to abstain from uttering a word of disapproval if you behave foolishly, as I am afraid you are very likely to do. That would be rather too one-sided a bargain."

"No doubt it would," agreed Beatrice, with an air of conviction. "It isn't as if you had any private ends to serve by saddling yourself with me; nothing but your kindness of heart induces you to undertake such a troublesome job, and when I commit the acts of folly that you anticipate, I must try to accept rebuke in a becoming spirit. Only don't traduce Miss Joy again, please, because that I will not stand."

Lady Clementina gave a sort of snort, but made no articulate rejoinder. She was not afraid of her sister-in-law, because, to do her justice, she was afraid of nobody; but, not wishing to mar poor young Stapleford's prospects, she mentally resolved to say no more about Miss Joy. As that lady had gone to stay with some distant relations, upon an indefinite leave of absence, and might very likely never be heard of again, it was comparatively easy to be generous to her.

It must be a pleasant thing to be young and beautiful and an heiress. The situation—as those who are neither young nor beautiful nor heiresses are fond of reminding us—has its drawbacks; but an impartial observer must admit that these are outweighed by its advantages. Beatrice Huntley, whose spirits were subject to frequent fluctuations, and who could not be described as an altogether happy person, had come to London bent upon enjoying to the full such pleasures as circumstances had placed within her reach; and she faithfully carried out her programme. It was not her first season; but it was the first in which she had been conscious of complete independence, and that gave it something of the charm of novelty. It is needless to say that admirers, old and new, speedily gathered about her like flies about a jar of honey, their impatient buzzings affording her no little amusement. She was full of engagements of every sort and kind; she had an unlimited supply of the most lovely frocks that money could buy; she never found a spare five minutes in which to sit down and read or think; and when she reached home in the grey dawn she was so tired that she fell asleep the instant after her head had touched

the pillow. At the age of twenty-one a life of that kind is exciting and entertaining, however unprofitable it may be. Beatrice found it so; indeed there were moments when she thought that she could never be really satisfied with any other kind of life, and that the lot of a woman of fashion was, after all, that for which she was best fitted.

When in this mood she looked with not unkindly eyes upon Lord Stapleford, a grown-up Eton boy, who had excellent health, an excellent temper, a great love for all sports and pastimes, and quite a fair average allowance of brains. People who have more than the average allowance of brains are not always pleasant people, and it is said they are seldom pleasant husbands. Lord Stapleford in any conceivable capacity was sure to be pleasant. He belonged to that class of Englishmen whom we are accustomed to consider as typical of our race, although, perhaps, the assumption would hardly bear a statistical test; he was not a handsome young man, having too square a face, too large a mouth, and a snub nose; but his complexion was clear, his shoulders were broad, and he always presented a clean, healthy, and smart appearance, which was agreeable to the eye. He chose to declare that Miss Huntley was his cousin, called her by her Christian name, soon became intimate with her, and did not persecute her with nearly such marked attentions as did certain other frequenters of the house in Park Lane. At a later period his demeanour underwent a change; but that was because he subsequently did what he had never intended to do, and fell over head and ears in love with the beautiful heiress. In the beginning of the

season he was heart-whole, and consequently exhibited himself at his best.

"How I wish I were you!" Miss Huntley exclaimed involuntarily one afternoon, when he was sitting opposite to her in her brother's library, with his elbows on his knees and the contented smile upon his lips which was as much a part of his customary equipment as the bouquet in his buttonhole.

"Wish you were me!" he repeated. "Why, in the name of goodness, should you wish that?"

"Well, for one thing, because you look as if you hadn't a care in the world," she answered.

"Oh, haven't I just got cares, though!" retorted Lord Stapleford. "That's all *you* know about it. Now if I were to say that I should like to change places with you, for instance——"

"But you couldn't say such a thing without palpable insincerity," interrupted Beatrice; "there never yet lived the man who wanted to be a woman. What are these heavy cares of yours, if one may ask?"

The young fellow laughed and made a gesture to simulate the turning of his pockets inside out. "A chronic deficit," he answered, "is the source of them all. I wonder what it feels like to be able to buy everything that one wants!"

"I don't know; the things that one wants are seldom in the market. Wealth is a very overrated possession."

"So rich people are always saying, and disgustingly ungrateful it is of them. If they don't appreciate what they have got, it ought to be taken away from them and given to others who would. There's no doubt that money is terribly thrown away upon some of them.

Upon our friend, Sir Joseph, for one. With two or three thousand a year he would be as happy as possible. Clementina is different; Clementina is expensive, though discontented."

Lady Clementina, who, with a visiting-book at her elbow, was busily writing cards of invitation at the other end of the room, looked round for an instant to say, "Don't be impertinent."

"Now, Clem," retorted Lord Stapleford (never would it have entered into the head of any other living being to address her ladyship by that diminutive; but Stapleford was a great favourite with her, and privileged to take liberties), "you give your mind to your work, or you'll be getting into trouble again, as you did the other day, when you forgot all the V's and W's. Why don't you keep a secretary or a companion or somebody to do these things for you?"

"Just because a secretary or companion would always be getting me into trouble," answered Lady Clementina. "It was Beatrice, not I, who made the mistake that you speak of; and it will be a long time before I ask her to help me again."

She resumed her task of addressing envelopes and tossing them into a basket; and Lord Stapleford, reverting presently to his subject, was beginning, "If I had a trifle of seventy or eighty thousand a year, the first thing that I should do would be to hire a man to perform all my duties for me," when the butler came in and delivered a card to Beatrice, who, after examining it, inquired: "Have you shown him into my room?"

On receiving an affirmative reply, she rose and said:

"Well, I am afraid I must tear myself away. We shall meet somewhere to-night, I suppose."

"I say, Clem," called out Lord Stapleford, "do you approve of this sort of thing? Here's some cheeky beggar demanding a private audience of Beatrice—and getting it too!"

"My approval," answered Lady Clementina, "depends entirely upon who the beggar may be. Not that Beatrice pays much attention to my approval."

"He isn't a beggar at all," said Beatrice; "he is a country parson, vowed to celibacy. He wouldn't interest either of you; but he does happen to interest me, so I shall keep him to myself." And without further explanation, she withdrew.

Sir Joseph, in the kindness of his heart and the prudence of his mind, had caused a bright little sitting-room, overlooking the Park, to be furnished and set apart for his sister's use, having with some little difficulty obtained Lady Clementina's consent to an arrangement which offered obvious advantages. It was here that Beatrice found Monckton gazing abstractedly out of the window, his hands, which were clasped behind his back, holding his shapeless felt hat, his trousers turned up, and a pair of thick boots upon his feet, just as if he had been still at Kingscliff. That very unfashionable figure, standing beside a table littered with invitation cards, and intervening between her and the unceasing stream of carriages outside, struck her with a sense of incongruity which, however, by no means lessened the warmth of her welcome.

"It seems so odd to see you here!" she exclaimed.

"But I am more than glad to see you, and it is very good of you to have come."

"To tell you the truth, I have come on a matter of business," said Monckton.

"You needn't have been in such a desperate hurry to tell me that you haven't come for the pleasure of seeing me."

"I didn't mean it in that way," Monckton answered, smiling; "I only felt that I ought to offer some apology for claiming a few minutes of your time. You are very busy in the pursuit of pleasure, aren't you?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "It's the only thing to be done."

"Do you really think so? And has the chase been successful, so far?"

"I really think that half measures are a mistake; and as for success, I may say that I have had as much as was possible. You are not going to moralize about Dead Sea fruit, I hope. That has been said so many, many times, and you are much too wise to believe that anybody ever listens to such tales until the dust and ashes have become palpable."

"It is the misfortune of a great many truths to be truisms," remarked Monckton; "but I think you will admit that I don't often preach out of the pulpit, and if I did, I shouldn't attempt it with you. You will have, as you say, to get your own experience, and as soon as I have stated my errand, I will leave you to proceed with it."

"You will have a cup of tea first, at all events. You are looking very pale and fagged, do you know. Is it exciting or depressing to conduct a mission?—or

a little of both, perhaps, like a London season? What a funny epoch we live in, with our missions and revivals and Salvation Armies and peculiar social developments! A dispassionate observer from another planet would think we were all running away from something, wouldn't he? And I wonder what he would think we were running away from?"

"You are rather unjust," observed Monckton.

"Of course I am; what else can you expect? You are a standing rebuke to me, and I defend myself as best I can—which isn't very well. Such a lot of good resolutions made down there at Kingscliff, away from all this hubbub, and not one of them kept! Well, we won't talk about it. What is the matter of business that you spoke of? If it's anything that I can do for you I'll do it, though it should be the reclaiming of the inhabitants of a back slum."

"How would you set about doing that, Miss Huntley? No; it is a simpler matter, and I am not particularly sanguine about it. I only happened to remember a word or two that you said to me just before you left Kingscliff, and I thought it might be worth while to let you know that the Manor House is for sale."

"You don't mean to say so!" exclaimed Beatrice. "This is most interesting—and most fortunate. Of course I will buy it. Ought I to telegraph? Is there any fear of my being forestalled? Has he offered it to his brother?"

"I think you will be in ample time if you write to the lawyers to-morrow and open negotiations; but no doubt you will have competitors as soon as it is known

that the place is in the market. Probably you will like to hear the price before coming to a decision."

"Oh, bother the price! It won't be more than £ 20,000, I suppose?"

"Well, no," answered Monckton laughing; "we may safely assume that it won't reach that figure."

"Then the Manor House is mine. Now tell me, what has made him resolve to sell the place so suddenly? I dare say I can answer that question for myself, though. Poor fellow! Will he have any objection to me as a purchaser, do you suppose?"

Monckton did not reply immediately. The secret of Brian's hopeless attachment had been imparted to him with the rest of that luckless young man's troubles, and he felt pretty sure that it was an open secret to Beatrice.

"Brian could have no objection to you as a *bonâ fide* purchaser," he said at length; "but I fancy that he would object rather strongly to your buying an estate which you did not want, in order to help him out of his difficulties. I hope he won't take it into his head that that is the case."

The effect of this gentle caution was not quite what Monckton had anticipated. Miss Huntley drew herself up, frowned, and rejoined, coldly:

"I really do not know what should lead him to imagine anything so ridiculous. I like Mr. Brian Segrave very much; but I am hardly intimate enough with him to commit the impertinence of offering him a present of £ 20,000 or £ 10,000, or whatever it may be."

"I beg your pardon," said Monckton, a little disconcerted. "I have good reasons for knowing that you

are generous and impulsive, and it occurred to me that your fancy to buy the Manor House might be only another piece of impulsive generosity. I don't know that any such notion will occur to Brian."

"Well, I trust not," Beatrice answered, smiling again. "Nothing is more disagreeable than to be suspected of quixotry upon insufficient grounds. Besides, I am not best pleased with your friend at the present moment. He might have given himself the trouble to call upon me, I think."

Monckton, being doubtful whether Brian would like the straits to which he had been reduced to be made known to Miss Huntley, merely observed that an organist who had daily avocations at Streatham could hardly be expected to find time for calling in Park Lane. "However," he added, "Brian has left Streatham now, and, if you like, I will tell him that you wish him to call."

"Oh, pray don't let him consider himself bound in any way," she returned. "The chances are that he wouldn't find me at home if he did call."

"I don't think," hazarded Monckton, as he rose to depart, "that I shall advise him to call."

Beatrice coloured very slightly, but looked her visitor full in the face and scarcely affected to misunderstand his meaning.

"As you please," she answered briefly. "Shall I see you again before you leave London?"

Monckton answered that he would come again if he could manage it; and as soon as he had left her Miss Huntley remarked aloud:

"It would do that dear, good Mr. Monckton no harm to be just a little bit more of a man of the world,

It isn't everybody who would like to be accused in so many words of having fallen in love with his *protégé*."

CHAPTER III.

BRIAN'S LUCK TURNS.

MONCKTON walked away from Park Lane, as unconscious of having suggested the idea alluded to by Miss Huntley in her soliloquy as he was innocent of entertaining it. He certainly did not think that Miss Huntley was enamoured of Brian Segrave, or that there was the least probability of her becoming so; but he did think that, if the young man paid his respects to her, she would be unable to help flirting, or seeming to flirt, with him. For that he did not incline to blame her very severely. He was more of a man of the world—more, at any rate, of a student of human nature—than she gave him credit for being, and he knew that young women, as well as young men, pass through a period of life during which it may be expected that they, too, after their fashion, will sow their wild oats. They do not, as a rule, mean much harm, nor, in truth, do they often do much; still it will occasionally happen that they come across an exceptional member of the opposite sex and break that exceptional person's heart. Monckton deemed it inexpedient to tell Brian that Miss Huntley had intimated a wish to see him; he even went a step farther and decided that he would say nothing about her intention of purchasing the Manor House property. She was a little bit too capricious to be counted upon; she might change her mind; it was extremely

probable that her relations would use their endeavours to make her do so, and it was as well to avoid premature announcements which might only pave the way for disappointment.

Therefore he kept his own counsel, though much tempted by Brian's pale face and preoccupied mien to violate it, and did not even mention that he himself had been in Park Lane that afternoon. And on the following day he was removed from temptation's way by an urgent appeal from his second in command at St. Michael's. Monckton, though an admirable organizer, had the defect which is common to so many admirable organizers of making himself too exclusively the main-spring of his work. When he took a holiday of ten days or a fortnight, parochial arrangements were pretty sure to fall out of gear. They had fallen out of gear now, and as the mission upon which he had been engaged in London was at an end, he felt bound to return home forthwith and resume the reins of government. But he persuaded Brian to remain on in Victoria Street without him.

"You will do me a real service by keeping the rooms aired," he declared. "Let me hear from you when you have struck your bargain. I hope it will be a good one."

"It's pretty sure to be that," Brian answered with a sigh. "Old Potter has written to me quite enthusiastically about it, praising you up to the skies for having 'restored me to sanity,' as he calls it, and promising to do his very best for me. He is evidently in high glee at the prospect of playing off Buswell against Gilbert, and is only afraid of my closing with the first

offer that comes to hand. He wants to know why the deuce I should care whether the house remains standing or not after it has passed out of my possession. It wouldn't be very easy to explain a wish of that kind to a hard-headed lawyer, would it? However, there isn't the shadow of a chance that my wish will be fulfilled; so it doesn't much matter."

Being thus wisely resigned to what appeared to be inevitable, Brian anticipated no particularly delightful news from Mr. Potter, who called upon him in person a few days after this, and whose countenance, as he entered, was beaming with the double satisfaction which an honest man feels in having served a friend and a lawyer in having done a smart stroke of business.

"Well, young man," said he, "I congratulate you upon your choice of friends; Mr. Monckton seems to be possessed of common sense. To be sure, I might say as much for myself; but then you don't choose to treat me as a friend—won't even answer when I write to you! Well, I forgive you; and what's more to the purpose, I believe I've sold your property for you. Subject to your approval, that is."

"Ah!" said Brian, drawing in his breath, "and who is the purchaser? Gilbert or Mr. Buswell?"

"Now, isn't that just like you! My good fellow, the first question to ask is, what is the price offered?"

"I don't so much care about that," said Brian.

Mr. Potter raised his hands and turned up the whites of his eyes. "He don't so much care about that! And this is a fellow who has been made acquainted with poverty, mind you!"

"Exactly; that's why I don't mind. I can live upon a very small income."

"Can you indeed? I should have thought differently; but I am glad to hear that it is so, for your income won't be a large one. You can't call £550 a year a large income."

"Five hundred and fifty a year!" repeated Brian in amazement.

"Well, yes; I take it that that, or perhaps a trifle more, would be about the figure, at four per cent.; and it's best to be contented with four per cent. in these days. You see, you must deduct something for expenses from the £15,000 which I hope to obtain for you."

"My dear Mr. Potter, you can't mean to tell me that anybody has offered £15,000 for the Manor House!"

"Why not? It is a fair price. I will even go so far as to say that it is a good one; but when Hemmings and Hawkins, in writing to us upon the subject, thought fit to make use of the expression 'exorbitant,' we replied at once that they mistook the people with whom they had to deal, that if their client was dissatisfied with our terms she was in no way compelled to agree to them, but that it would be quite useless to attempt to beat us down. In fact, I could see plainly enough that their client had given them *carte blanche*."

"Who is their client?" inquired Brian eagerly.

"One Miss Huntley, a daughter of old Joe Huntley the contractor; you must have seen her down at Kings-cliff last year. I mentioned that you were particularly anxious to sell the Manor House to somebody who

would use it as a residence, and the answer that I received was that such was Miss Huntley's present intention, but that she could not bind herself with regard to the future. That was as much as any one could say; because, of course, you have no power to exact conditions."

At the sound of Miss Huntley's name Brian's heart gave a great leap, and it must be confessed that for a moment he did entertain the surmise which Monckton had been so promptly snubbed for putting forward. "I hope to goodness you said nothing about my being hard up!" he exclaimed.

"Naturally I did," returned Mr. Potter sarcastically. "I stated that you wanted £15,000; but that so pressing was your need of money that you would accept £5000 rather than lose a chance of selling. You evidently take me for a congenial idiot, and I ought to feel much flattered by your condescending to employ me, under the circumstances."

Brian laughed. "It is I who am the idiot," said he; "but really you have rather taken my breath away. I had no conception that I was the owner of such a valuable property. Since I can't keep it myself, I am delighted that it is to go to Miss Huntley. I would sooner she had it than anybody else, and I am very much obliged to you, Mr. Potter, for doing so well for me."

Mr. Potter rubbed his hands. "I think," he observed modestly, "that we have done pretty well. Possibly you might have got more by waiting a year or so; but that would hardly have suited you; and, taking into consideration your wish that the purchaser should

have no connection with the building interest, I think, as I say, that we have done pretty well. Mr. Buswell, I fear, will be disappointed when he hears of the transaction."

"Yes," agreed Brian meditatively; "and so, perhaps, will my brother."

A smile of subdued but intense satisfaction overspread Mr. Potter's features. "And so, perhaps, will your brother. It is a pity that he was not first in the field, and I should not be surprised to find that he was rather annoyed with me for not offering him the refusal; but then, as I shall point out to him, it was my bounden duty to forward your interests and carry out your instructions from the moment that you did me the honour to place your affairs in my hands. I may take it, then, that you authorize me to come to terms with Hemmings and Hawkins? The lady, it seems, is in rather a hurry."

Brian gave the required authority without any hesitation. His characteristic indifference with regard to money matters prevented him from entering the protest which Mr. Potter had secretly feared; for indeed £15,000 was the outside value of the Manor House estate, and it was certain that the purchaser, if she intended to reside there, would have to expend a considerable sum on repairs. But Brian did not trouble his head about that. What interested him far more, and engrossed his thoughts for a long time after Mr. Potter had left him, was the question of whether he should or should not call upon the lady with whom he was about to drive so hard a bargain. She had unquestionably given him permission to do so, and there

seemed to be no good reason why he should not avail himself thereof; but he had become so accustomed to the idea of her being utterly and for ever beyond his reach that he had some difficulty in overcoming it. Possibly, too, he may have half-consciously dreaded lest, by renewing acquaintance with her, he should lay up for himself memories less agreeable than those upon which his love now subsisted. But a debate of that kind could only have one issue, as Brian himself must have been aware; for at last he broke into a subdued laugh, muttering, "As if anything on earth, except the lack of a decent suit of clothes, could keep me away from her!"

The barrier referred to had now been removed, thanks to Monckton's insistence, and, although it was too late to call on Miss Huntley that day, Brian was able to go and dine at his club, a thing which he would not have ventured to do without a renewal of his wardrobe. It seemed as if the tide of his fortunes, after ebbing for so long, had now turned in earnest; for the first person whom he saw on entering the club was little Tommy Phipps, and Phipps, instead of instantly taking flight, came forward in the most cordial manner and shook him by the hand, exclaiming, "So here you are at last, Segrave! I have been seeking you high and low for an age—at least, I should have been seeking you if I had had the faintest notion of where to seek. I wonder whether you recollect a suggestion I made to you last winter about an opera of which you were to provide the music and I the words."

"I recollect it so well," answered Brian, "that I have composed a lot of airs which I thought might be

suitable for it, and which I meant to show you long ago, only I couldn't get hold of you."

"Oh, well, I've been abroad, you know," the other observed, with a passing twinge of compunction. "I am very glad to hear that you haven't dropped the idea. What are you doing to-night? Could you dine with me and discuss matters?"

Brian answered that he could and would, with great pleasure; and shortly afterwards he was favoured with an outline of the drama whereby Mr. Phipps hoped to add fresh laurels to those which already adorned his brow.

"I must tell you, Segrave," the latter premised, "that I am not a mere librettist. If I were, I should only be called upon to supply a certain amount of doggerel to suit your composition, and I couldn't reasonably ask for half profits, which is the arrangement that I propose to make with you. This work, if it ever comes to anything, will be as much mine as yours. The music, I don't doubt, will be first-rate; but the dialogue and the situations which I shall contribute won't be altogether bad, I trust. My belief is that the public nowadays is not a bit more willing to tolerate rubbish set to good music than bad music combined with a good play; and, for my part, I think the public is right. I don't know whether you agree with me."

Brian having nodded assent, the dramatist continued: "I'll just give you an idea of the kind of thing I have in my mind. I should name it, I think, *The King's Veto*, and the plot would be something like this: the tenor would be the king—call him Conrad, King of Democratia, if you like—who suddenly and quite

unexpectedly finds himself a reigning sovereign, owing to the death of his cousin, who has been drowned in the Royal yacht, together with the heir apparent and the rest of his family. Conrad had been upon the point of contracting a morganatic marriage with the soprano, Phyllis, a charming young person, but not of royal blood. Of course his accession to the throne puts this arrangement, which had been sanctioned by the late king, out of the question, and the first thing that his ministers tell him is that he must not only give up all thought of it, but ally himself as speedily as possible with his distant kinswoman, the Princess Octavia (contralto), lest the dynasty should become extinct. Now, at this time Democratia is in the throes of a constitutional crisis, the advanced party having brought in a measure for the extension of the suffrage to—to—well, say to the criminal classes and lunatics, and having carried their bill by a large majority, Conrad, who cares very little whether all his subjects or only nine-tenths of them have votes, but who cares a great deal about Phyllis, inquires into his constitutional powers, and is delighted to find that he possesses a right of veto. He immediately informs the ministry that unless he is allowed to marry the girl of his heart, he shall exercise it. They assure him that the right of veto is never exercised, and that he daren't do such a thing; and he proves the contrary to them. Whereupon they resign, and the other side takes office. The other side, after due reflection, decides that the extension of the franchise ought not any longer to be made a party question, and re-introduces the same bill, with the same result. This, you will perceive, brings Democratia pretty

near to a revolution, and we shall have an animated debate in the Chamber upon the question of whether it is or is not competent for Parliament to abolish the king's veto."

"Won't that approach burlesque?" suggested Brian.

"Not if we have proper costumes. I admit that it wouldn't do to put on the stage an assembly in trousers and frock-coats; but sixteenth-century attire will make it all right, and the scene will give you a good opportunity for choruses. Besides, you will have plenty of pathos by-and-by. The villain (and barytone) will be Prince Otho, a connection of the Royal house, who has designs upon the throne, and who naturally eggs Conrad on. Then there will be a socialist plot for the assassination of the king and establishment of the republic, and Otho will mix himself up in it, meaning to use the conspirators for his own purposes and get rid of them afterwards. Now, I'm sure you see what can be done with these materials—Phyllis, perceiving her lover's danger and determined to renounce him rather than let him sacrifice himself for her; the ministers, in a mortal funk lest anarchy should supervene and their occupation be gone, surrounding their beloved sovereign with detectives and guards, and Otho carrying on his schemes with every prospect of success. You could bring in a most affecting *aria* and *duo* where Phyllis takes leave of Conrad

'Bid me not stay!

Lovers to-day

Part but to meet when life passes away'—

that sort of thing, you know, and then the usual rumty-tumty about sever and never and for ever—I think it

might be made to go with a very pretty swing. For the *finale* we should have a masked ball at the Palace—obviously the conspirators' only chance. Phyllis, who has joined them for certain reasons, engages to lead the King out into the gardens, where the charge of dynamite is to be placed, declaring herself ready to lay down her life for the sake of her country—an offer which they are only too happy to accept. That makes things quite simple for her. All she has to do is to persuade Otho to assume a domino exactly resembling his Majesty's, draw him aside upon some pretext, and so keep her word by dying for her country, because, from the moment that both she and Otho are removed, Conrad's throne will be safe. The dynamite, of course, hangs fire; the assassin in charge of it, seeing that he has failed, rushes forth and stabs Otho to the heart. Then follows the discovery of the plot, the recognition of Phyllis's heroism, and her elevation to the rank of Queen Consort by the unanimous consent of a grateful people. That's only a rough draft; I shall improve upon it when I come to work out the details; but I think it gives ample scope to the musician, don't you?"

Brian nodded. The skeleton of Phipps's drama seemed to him to be promising; and as the evening went on and his companion, who was in a communicative mood, told him something of the profits earned by popular playwrights, he became more and more sanguine, inwardly laying the foundations of various airy castles. He did not know a great deal about the woman whom he adored; but he had a strong impression that success of any kind would appeal powerfully to her: already, in prophetic fancy, he

"Saw the bright eyes of the dear one discover,
She thought that he was not unworthy to love her."

It was perhaps neither surprising nor inexcusable that he should have forgotten for a time the social gulf which yawned between him and a lady of Beatrice Huntley's wealth and celebrity: anyhow, he was not suffered to forget it long. For between eleven and twelve o'clock there strolled into the smoking-room of the club a fair-haired young man in evening dress, who, on espying Phipps, called out, "Hullo, Tommy! how are you getting on? Been writing any more plays lately?"

And while Brian was thinking that the features of the newcomer were not altogether unfamiliar to him, Phipps responded:

"My dear fellow, I'm going to write something that will make you applaud with all your hands and feet—a joint affair this time. By the way, let me introduce you to my friend and future colleague, Mr. Segrave. Lord Stapleford, Mr. Segrave."

"Not my old friend Segrave major?" said Stapleford. "By Jove! it is though. Don't you remember me, Segrave?"

"To be sure I do," answered Brian, who, indeed, had been in the same division with Stapleford at Eton. "I was sure I knew you, only I couldn't put a name to you."

A short conversation over bygone days followed, and then Stapleford said,

"I wonder whether you have anything to do with a certain Segrave from whom my cousin Beatrice has just bought a house somewhere down in the west."

"I have sold, or rather I believe I am about to sell, the only house that I possess to Miss Huntley," Brian replied. "I didn't know she was your cousin."

"Of course she's my cousin. At least, her sister-in-law is, which is much the same thing; and a nice rage her sister-in-law is in with her for buying your house, by that same token. What she's doing it for goodness only knows! She swears she means to spend the winters there in future, but I hope she don't mean it."

Phipps chuckled. "That sort of winter quarters wouldn't exactly suit you, eh?"

"Good Lord! no," Stapleford replied unguardedly. "Why, there's no decent hunting to be had within a hundred miles of the place!"

"After that incidental admission," laughed Phipps, nudging Brian with his elbow, "I presume we may offer our respectful congratulations. When does the event come off?"

This innocent allusion to an engagement which everybody had been speaking of as imminent for weeks past was not very well received. Stapleford looked annoyed for a moment; then, assuming an air of stony unconsciousness, replied, "I don't know what you mean," while Brian started up hurriedly, and said in a somewhat husky voice that he must be off.

There is no such thing as being prepared for a shock. The blow, when it comes, is not the less stunning in its effects because it has been foreseen; and Brian, who, ever since his departure from Kingscliff, had been telling himself at intervals that Beatrice would certainly marry before long, stumbled out into the street

with a sickening conviction that all the musical and dramatic triumphs which the world could offer would be of no solace to him now. He had not heard Stapleford's disclaimer, and, if he had heard it, would not have believed in it.

"What a consummate fool I must be!" he ejaculated. "To think that I have been nursing a remnant of hope all this time!"

Possibly he may have been a fool; but if all those who cherish hope unconsciously be fools, then without doubt he had something like the entire human race for his associates.

CHAPTER IV.

GILBERT SEES BREAKERS AHEAD.

GILBERT SEGRAVE was as good a landlord as his father had been before him. Agriculture had not the charm for him which it had had for the old man; but he was not a whit less interested in the improvement of his property; and as he now had command of more ready money than Sir Brian had ever possessed, he was able by judicious expenditure to avoid that reduction of rents which was beginning to press heavily upon some of his neighbours. Judicious expenditure is a very different thing from loss, and it caused Gilbert's tenants to regard him with friendship and approval. He was anxious, for many reasons, that they should so regard him. Among other things, he wanted them to vote for him when the time should come; and he believed that they would vote for him, in spite of

Tory leanings and some distrust of the newly-enfranchised labourers.

One morning as he was walking homewards, after sanctioning, against the judgment of his bailiff, some drainage works which a farmer had asked him to take in hand, he was surprised to see a stout little old gentleman in black broadcloth and a tall hat trotting up the avenue. Mr. Potter had not visited Beckton since the day of Sir Brian's funeral, nor had it ever been his custom to do so without previous warning. He explained himself after shaking hands with Gilbert and accepting the latter's invitation to luncheon.

"There are one or two trifling matters to which I wished to call your attention," said he, "and, being here, I thought I might as well communicate with you by word of mouth."

It was not until the matters referred to, as well as an excellent luncheon, had been disposed of that Gilbert asked:

"And what has brought you to Kingscliff, Mr. Potter, if it isn't an impertinent question? Not pleasure, I'm quite sure; and I thought we were your only clients in these parts."

"So you are—so you are," answered the old lawyer, sipping his wine. "What good claret this is! The days of good claret are nearly over now, more's the pity. Yes; I have no clients hereabouts but yourselves—you and your brother."

"My brother!" echoed Gilbert, lifting his eyebrows and smiling. Then as a sudden light broke in upon him—"Oh, I see! he has made up his mind to sell the

Manor House at last. Much the wisest thing that he could do, in my opinion."

Mr. Potter closed his eyes and nodded. "I quite agree with you; it is what I have advised all along. And I am sure you will be glad to hear," he added, looking up abruptly, "that he has got a capital price for the place too."

Gilbert coloured with annoyance. He quite understood Mr. Potter's malignant satisfaction and thought to himself, "You old wretch! you came here on purpose to triumph over me."

But the thrust had been delivered too suddenly to be successfully parried, and he could not refrain from saying:

"I think I ought to have been told that the place was for sale. Both you and Brian must have known that I was anxious to buy it, and in all probability I should have been ready to offer as good a price as Mr. Buswell."

"Ah," observed Mr. Potter placidly, "I was afraid you would be vexed that the property should have slipped through your fingers; still, in these cases, one must stick to the rule of first come, first served; and really, as your legal adviser, I don't know that I could have recommended you to give quite as much as Miss Huntley has done. By the way, Miss Huntley is the purchaser, not Mr. Buswell."

"Miss Huntley!" ejaculated Gilbert, to whom this announcement was not less surprising and scarcely less unwelcome than the preceding one; "what in the world does she want with the Manor House?"

"I can't say; I don't know the lady. Hemmings

and Hawkins, who conveyed her offer to me, state that she proposes passing a part of every year there; but as she is rich, young, and also, I am told, handsome, her plans may be looked upon as liable to modifications. Of course, she will always be able to sell, though whether at a loss or a profit will depend upon circumstances. I should be sorry to assert that she has made a bad bargain. Her father was a long-headed man, and possibly she has inherited some of his astuteness."

"I think you might at least have let me know before you completed the transaction," Gilbert repeated presently.

"How could we, with these people pressing for an immediate reply, and practically allowing us to name our own terms? Still, I don't wonder at your being disappointed."

"I did not say that I was disappointed," returned Gilbert, to whom Mr. Potter's smile was fast becoming intolerable. "If Miss Huntley has offered you a fancy price, I could not have competed with her; and, indeed, the Manor House might have proved as much of a white elephant to me as it probably will to her. My only feeling is that Brian has behaved in a rather unbrotherly way to me. That, however, is nothing new."

"Ah!" said Mr. Potter.

"Yes; and now that he is, as I suppose, in a measure independent, there seems to be less chance than ever of his making friends with me. I regret it very much indeed; but I am glad to think that the quarrel is, at all events, not of my seeking."

"Ah!" said Mr. Potter again.

There was evidently nothing to be done with this

exasperating old lawyer but to get rid of him as soon as possible, and Gilbert was rejoiced to hear him say that he must catch the afternoon express to London. His disappointment was greater than he had expressed; greater also, perhaps, than Mr. Potter suspected. For some time after he had been left alone he sat, with his head upon his hand, pondering over the significance and results of Brian's unbrotherly conduct, and his apprehensions were summed up in the ejaculation which escaped him at last, "What will Buswell say to this, I wonder?"

Any doubts that he may have entertained as to that were soon set at rest by the arrival of Mr. Buswell himself; and the face of Mr. Buswell, as he bustled into the library where Gilbert was sitting, was red, and lowering clouds were upon his brow.

"Well, Mr. Segrave," he exclaimed, without even going through the formality of an ordinary greeting, "you *have* let us in nicely this time and no mistake! What was you thinking about, sir, to let your brother dispose of his property to anybody but you or me?"

"Pray sit down, Mr. Buswell," returned Gilbert, who was not best pleased with the other's manner. "I have only just heard of the sale of the Manor House, and I confess that I have heard of it with considerable regret. My brother is free to make his own arrangements, and I dare say that I might not have been able to prevent him from making this one even if he had consulted me, although I quite see that it would have been better for you, and indeed for Kingscliff, if you could have acquired the land and built upon it."

"Better!" cried Mr. Buswell, "why, it's essential;

neither more nor less than that. I've told you all along that we must have the Manor 'Ouse property, and I pretty generally say what I mean and mean what I say."

"Really, I am very sorry, Mr. Buswell, but I don't see how I can help you. It seems to me that you had better address yourself to Miss Huntley."

"What!—and have to pay twenty thousand pounds for land that we might have got for eight or ten! Mind you, Mr. Segrave, this is a matter that concerns you as well as me. I told you I could get you into Parliament, and, to speak plainly, I can keep you out of Parliament too."

"How will you benefit by keeping me out of Parliament, Mr. Buswell?"

"That's not the question; and perhaps I should rather have said that you may be kep' out in spite of me. There's a certain number of votes that you can secure by showing people that you have the welfare of the place at 'eart, and unless you exert yourself, those same votes 'll be given to your opponent, whoever he may be, if it's only to punish you."

"In other words, the Manor House estate is to be the price of my election."

"Not a bit of it; nobody's asking you for a bribe. But self-interest, Mr. Segrave, is at the root of all human actions, and if any one tells you it isn't, don't you believe him. We want that land at a reasonable figure; we've looked to you to get it for us, and we look to you still—that's all."

"Then you will be disappointed, I am afraid. How am I to get the land for you?"

"Ah, that's your affair. I know what I should do in your place! but maybe I should put your back up if I mentioned it."

"You can mention it," returned Gilbert shortly.

"Well," said Mr. Buswell, with a chuckle, "I should marry the lady, that's what *I* should do. By all accounts, she wouldn't be unwilling. Now after that, I'll wish you good day. I see you don't much relish my putting my oar in; but your best friend couldn't have given you more sensible advice. Think it over, Mr. Segrave, think it over. I'll be bound to say that the longer you think of it the better you'll like it."

He retreated without giving Gilbert time to administer the rebuke which his impertinence merited. He was certainly very impertinent; still, as he had boasted, his advice was sensible—or would have been, if the young candidate for parliamentary honours had been free and heart-whole. Gilbert, who was neither the one nor the other, could not help thinking it over and verifying, after a fashion, the prediction of its author; for the idea of his possible marriage with Miss Huntley soon ceased to make him angry. Not for an instant did he dream of being false to Kitty, only he wondered whether, supposing that there were no Kitty in existence, Miss Huntley would have deigned to look favourably upon him, and the popular impression of which Mr. Buswell had made himself the echo filled him with a certain complacency. But this was an unprofitable subject of speculation; what preoccupied Gilbert longer was the question of why Miss Huntley had bought the Manor House at all—a question to which the ostensible reply seemed to him altogether in-

adequate. And when he had given up that enigma, there remained for consideration the more serious one of how he was to get himself elected without fulfilling Mr. Buswell's conditions. The scarcely veiled threat of that worthy was not to be misunderstood or disregarded, yet what he had named as the price of his support was virtually unattainable.

When one rock breaks the even flow of a prosperous career, it is well to keep a look-out for others. Some days after Gilbert had received the unwelcome visits described above, he drove over to the other side of the county in order to be present at a Conservative demonstration and *fête*, organized by Sir John Pollington and others and held in the grounds of that patriotic baronet. No invitations to this gathering were issued, a charge of sixpence for admission being exacted, lest unpleasant things should be said about the refreshments and prizes which were provided at Sir John's expense and freely offered to persons of all shades of political opinion. Gilbert had been advised to put in an appearance among the other country gentlemen, and although he would fain have avoided entering upon the territory of a man who persistently declined to see him when they met, he judged it best not to render himself conspicuous by absence.

Many of his own supporters, including Admiral Greenwood, welcomed him on his arrival. It was a beautiful day, the well-timbered, undulating park was thronged by the multitudinous rulers of this favoured land, who were competing against one another in hurdle-races and sack-races, playing kiss in-the-ring, and otherwise disporting themselves, while the nobility and

gentry of the neighbourhood looked on in benign sympathy.

"I call this a great success," said good-natured Admiral Greenwood, rubbing his hands. "I like to see people happy, whether they're Liberals or Conservatives, don't you? Not much fun for poor Pollington, though, I expect. A pretty state his grass will be in to-morrow morning. And after all, the Tories are hardly likely to get a single extra vote for all their trouble."

"Don't be too sure of that," retorted a Conservative lady, who was standing beside him. "We aren't trying to catch votes by providing the electors with a day's pleasuring. The pleasuring is only the bait, the speech is the hook by which we hope to land them."

"Pollington's speech?" asked the Admiral incredulously.

"No, though he is very convincing, if people would only listen to him. But we have a trump-card up our sleeves, as you shall see presently."

And indeed, after the sports had been wound up and the prizes distributed from a platform which had been erected beneath a spreading oak, the real business of the day began. Sir John harangued at considerable length and with undoubted weight, exposing the countless blunders of a discredited administration; but perhaps he was a trifle too weighty for his audience, and his tone throughout was one of unqualified gloom. He obtained a *succès d'estime*. Other speakers, more or less dreary, followed him and were listened to with resignation by some and undisguised impatience by others. Then arose a stoutish, middle-aged man, with a smooth-shaven face, a cock nose and a twinkle in his

eye. He advanced to the front of the platform, his hands tucked under his coat-tails, and took a deliberate survey of the sea of upturned faces below him.

"This is their trump-card," whispered the Admiral to Gilbert; "Pollington has been telling me about him. He's a man called Giles, a Q.C., and a rare good speaker, they say."

Mr. Giles soon showed that he possessed at any rate that essential condition of popular oratory which Sir John Pollington lacked; for he made the crowd listen to him. He passed lightly over foreign affairs, remarking that that subject had been pretty thoroughly dealt with in the admirable speeches which they had just heard, and that if Liberal statesmen had any defence to offer of their policy in Egypt and Afghanistan, all he could say was it hadn't yet been put into an intelligible shape. But he should like to say a word or two about the great benefits which these same statesmen were promising to bestow upon the community if only they were restored to power in the new parliament. And then he began to be extremely funny. He ridiculed the theory that subdividing land would make it more productive—a theory which might serve well enough to elicit a round of cheers from Birmingham artisans, but which would hardly go down with farmers, or with farm-labourers either. He was very good-humoured, he told some capital stories, made one or two telling points, and kept his audience on the broad grin from first to last.

"Free education, compulsory sale of land, and all the rest of it, these are tempting offers, gentlemen; but the worst of them is that our Radical friends don't

propose to pay for them out of their own pockets. Oh, dear no! Yet somebody must provide the funds; and if you don't know who'll be called upon to fulfil that humble, necessary function, I think I can tell you. Why, the ratepayers! And by the look of most of you whom I see here to-day, I'm sadly afraid that that means yourselves. I, too, am a ratepayer; and my experience—I can't say whether it's yours or not—is that my rates are quite heavy enough already."

And so forth, and so forth. The speech was well received, and Mr. Giles retired amidst prolonged applause.

"What do you think of that, Mr. Segrave?" a voice well known to Gilbert whispered in his ear.

"I think it would be a very good thing if we could get the gentleman over to our side," answered Gilbert, laughing. "Who is he? Do you know anything about him?"

"I know just this about him, that he's likely to be your opponent at Kingscliff, and that it'll take a good man to beat him," was Mr. Buswell's reply. "A man who, as I told you the other day, can show that he has the welfare of the place at 'eart," he added significantly.

Gilbert turned away. Until lately he had flattered himself—indeed, Buswell had as good as assured him—that he would have a walk over; but now it seemed that this had been rather too hasty an assumption. Under the circumstances, it was a little provoking to find Admiral Greenwood bubbling over with laughter at the enemy's jokes, and quite set upon making the enemy's acquaintance, with a view to asking him to dinner.

"You had better get Sir John Pollington to introduce you," said Gilbert, and sauntered away across the grass with Kitty, to whom, if to no one else, he felt that he might fairly look for sympathy.

But even Kitty, it appeared, was not sympathetically disposed on that inauspicious day; for she opened the conversation by saying—

"I am so delighted to hear that Beatrice Huntley has bought the Manor House. She used to talk about it sometimes; but never thought that she really meant it. Aren't you glad?"

"Considering that I particularly wanted to buy the Manor House myself, I can't say that I am," answered Gilbert, with a touch of asperity. "When I made Brian an offer for it some months ago he gave me to understand that he had no intention of selling; but I suppose he couldn't resist the temptation of making a good round sum and serving me a nasty turn at one blow."

"Oh, I am sure he never meant to serve you a nasty turn!" cried Kitty.

In the depths of her honest little heart she was conscious of not being quite as delighted as she ought to be at the prospect of her friend's acquiring a permanent establishment at Kingscliff; but that Brian should be provided with means sufficient to live upon seemed to her to be a subject for unmixed satisfaction, and presently she made a timid remark to that effect.

"I am quite with you there," declared Gilbert, who seldom suffered himself to display temper for more than a moment; "only I confess that I should have

been better pleased if he had consented to deal with me instead of with Miss Huntley. You may be right in taking the most charitable view of his conduct, but it is certainly unlucky that he should have done the only thing that it was in his power to do to imperil my election."

"I don't understand," said Kitty.

But Gilbert did not care to be more explicit. He changed the subject, and soon afterwards took his departure. As he drove home, he said to himself that although clever women may not be altogether desirable as wives, a certain degree of intelligence is no such bad thing. Hitherto Kitty had always backed him up blindly and submissively, but when he had stated what was no more than the simple truth, that Brian had placed his election in jeopardy, she had looked almost indignantly at him and had declared that she did not understand. Surely she might have understood that much! And then, for the second time, he fell to wondering what his future lot in life might have been if he had not happened to lose his heart to Kitty Greenwood.

CHAPTER V.

AN AMICABLE MEETING.

FROM the day of his succession to the Beckton estate, Gilbert Segrave had discharged the various duties entailed upon him thereby with a thoroughness which had amply occupied his time, and had prevented him from feeling bored; but although the life of a country gentleman was not altogether distasteful to

him, it was hardly that for which he considered himself to be best adapted by nature, and when at length he granted himself a holiday, and went up to London to see his friends, his sensations were very much those of a schoolboy who has reached the end of an unusually long term.

To many people who repair to London every season, the society of that city simply means the meeting of their country friends in London houses; but Gilbert, who had taken a good deal of trouble in past time to form a large acquaintance, could look forward to rather more variety than that. He could look forward, too, to the increase of popularity which necessarily attaches to an increase of income; and as he was one of the rapidly diminishing minority of young men who like going to parties, his holiday promised to be an agreeable one.

Nevertheless, it was to a country acquaintance, or at least to a lady whose acquaintance he had made in the country, that one of his first visits was paid. He was very desirous of seeing Miss Huntley, not only for her own sake, but because he wanted to know why she had forestalled him in the purchase of land to which he conceived that he had a prior claim; therefore, when he called at her brother's house in Park Lane, he was glad to hear that she was at home and would receive him. He was shown into the boudoir, of which mention has already been made, and on his entrance she looked up from the davenport at which she was seated, saying:

"How do you do? You are more civil than your brother, who has never been near me all this time."

"You have been in communication with him to some purpose, though," remarked Gilbert, as he took possession of the chair to which she pointed.

"Indirectly, I have. My lawyers have been in communication with his lawyers."

"And your bankers have had something to say to his bankers."

"Naturally; and the result of that is that my extensive property now adjoins your property. I hope you are pleased."

"Would you be greatly affronted," asked Gilbert, "if I were to answer that I am not?"

"Not the least in the world; I love the unvarnished truth. Added to which, I knew quite well beforehand that you wouldn't be pleased. You wanted the Manor House yourself, didn't you?"

She had risen and had placed herself in a chair facing her visitor, at whom she was looking with an ironical smile which he hardly knew how to interpret.

"I wanted it, and want it, very much," he replied. "What I don't understand is, why you should want it—always supposing that you do."

"Well, it looks as if I did, doesn't it?"

"Yes; but appearances are often deceptive, I wonder whether you would mind telling me what was your object in doing this eccentric thing."

"You may set the apparent eccentricity down to commercial instinct," answered Beatrice calmly. "That sort of thing is hereditary, and I belong to the Buswell genus, you know. By the way, I flatter myself that I have rather taken the wind out of Mr. Buswell's sails this time."

"And out of mine too, for that matter. Do you really mean to pull the house down and go in for building leases, then?"

"I can't say what I may do eventually. Just at present my idea is to set up my household gods at Kingscliff. I like the place, and I like some of the people—Kitty Greenwood, for instance, and Mr. Monckton and Captain Mitchell, not to mention others who seem disinclined to give me a welcome. How did you leave them all?"

"Much as usual, I think," answered Gilbert; "and if they are all as overjoyed at the prospect of your settling among us as the humble individual whom you wouldn't mention, you won't have much reason to complain of them."

"Many thanks; but I understood you to say that you were anything but overjoyed."

"All I meant to say was that I wish you had fixed your choice upon any other dwelling than the Manor House. It is a tumble-down old place; it hasn't been lived in for years; you will have to spend a fortune in making it habitable, and——"

"And above all, you or Mr. Buswell, or both of you, had designs upon it. Why didn't you tell me this sooner?"

"You appear to have been aware of it. Besides, you didn't give us much time," observed Gilbert, laughing.

"I am so impetuous. My only excuse is that if I had let Joseph and Clementina know what I was meditating, they would have made my life a burden to me. I find it absolutely necessary to confront them

with accomplished facts. What about the political outlook? Is your seat safe?"

"By no means so safe as it was, I am afraid. For one thing, I am told that I am to have a dangerous opponent in the person of one Giles, Q.C., who is gifted with a glib tongue; and then you have put a most formidable spoke in my wheel by preventing the extension of the borough. Buswell informs me that he takes this as evidence that I haven't the interest of the place at heart, and he half threatens to withdraw his support."

"I am quite inconsolable! What can I do to atone for my selfishness?"

"Nothing, that I know of; but Buswell may relent, or I may be returned in spite of him; and if I am not—why, the loss of a seat in Parliament is not too high a price to pay for the pleasure of having you as a next-door neighbour."

"How pretty! And you really look almost as if you meant it."

"I do mean it," Gilbert averred, boldly.

She laid her head slightly on one side, and rested her cheek on her right hand, while she gazed pensively at him. There was no denying that she was a very beautiful woman.

"Ah," she sighed—and if his life had depended upon it he could not have said for certain whether she was laughing at him or not—"what a pity it is that you can't both represent Kingscliff and have me near you! Is there no conceivable way of effecting the combination?"

Well, of course, there was a way which was not

only conceivable but so obvious that Gilbert was sure that she could not be thinking of it. Nevertheless, his heart beat faster and he was conscious of a constrained ring in his voice as he answered laughingly: "I think I ought to be contented with one or the other. We can't expect to get everything that we want in this disappointing world."

"But we can try," she rejoined. "I imagined that you were one of those people who always try to get what they want—and generally succeed."

Again he could make nothing either of her expression or of her intonation. Both appeared to be quite serious; and yet he was too shrewd and too sceptical to accept the flattering inference suggested. The hypothesis that she could be deliberately throwing herself at the head of a humble country squire was only admissible upon the assumption that she had fallen in love with that fortunate squire, and if such were the case—But Gilbert could not trust himself to dwell upon these perilous speculations.

"Oh, I assure you that I am by no means successful," he began hastily; for he had to say something, and how to end his sentence he knew not.

However he was relieved from embarrassment on that score; for before he had got any farther, the door was thrown open and Mr. Segrave was announced.

"Another Mr. Segrave!" exclaimed Beatrice, rising. "Honours are falling upon me thick and fast this afternoon."

Brian strode into the room in time to catch her words, which brought him to an abrupt standstill. But it was only for a moment that he paused. Awkward

encounters are seldom awkward in outward appearance, and this one had been anticipated on both sides, although it had now come about with unexpected suddenness. Brian, after shaking hands with Miss Huntley, said quite quietly, "How are you, Gilbert?" and Gilbert said, "Well, Brian?"—after which they all three sat down and began to talk commonplaces as fast as they could.

For five minutes or so this was well enough, and in truth each of these admirably-behaved brothers, being sincerely desirous of avoiding unpleasantness, would have been content to go on in the same strain until one or other of them saw a fit opportunity for retiring; but they had to deal with a lady who did not love the commonplace, and to whom so matter-of-course a treatment of the situation may have seemed somewhat tame.

So after a time she addressed the elder, and—"When you came in," said she, "your brother and I were in full wrangle over the property which is mine now and was yours the other day. I have got it, and I am not going to give it up; but wasn't it a little bit cruel of you to sell it to me when you knew how badly he wanted it?"

Brian flushed slightly, but answered without hesitating: "I wished the house to go, if possible, to somebody who would live in it."

"And how can you tell that I shall live in it?"

"I suppose you yourself can't tell," he replied, thinking of what Stapleford had said; "but there is the chance; and if I had sold it to—to anybody else there would have been no chance at all." He added in a somewhat lower voice, "I was very sorry to give up the old place; but it was necessary."

She chanced at this moment to meet his eyes, which were fixed wistfully upon her, and a swift change and softening came into her own. This, however, vanished immediately, and she turned to Gilbert, who was steadfastly contemplating the inside of his hat.

"When are you coming to be introduced to my people?" she asked. "You will find my brother full of political information and courtesy towards political opponents; and it wouldn't at all surprise me if Clementina were to amuse you. Some people are amused by her, I believe. Couldn't you come and dine with us quietly some evening?" She glanced at a list of engagements. "Would next Saturday at half-past eight suit you?" she inquired. "I see I have got two dinners down for that day, and as I can't go to both, I may as well go to neither."

Gilbert at once accepted, and she made a note of it. Then glancing over her shoulder at the elder brother, "You too?" she asked.

"Thank you," answered Brian, with evident embarrassment, "you are very kind; but——"

"I have booked you," she interrupted, shutting up her tablets, "and you can't get out of it. Engagements must be kept, whether we like it or not; otherwise society couldn't hold together for a day. Those two dinner engagements of mine would certainly have been kept, if it hadn't been physically impossible to keep them. And that reminds me that I promised faithfully to go to tea with a cousin of mine who lives at the far end of South Kensington, and I ought to have been there half an hour ago."

The two young men rose simultaneously. Gilbert was the first to leave the room, and as Brian was following, she laid her hand lightly on his arm. "Don't throw me over on Saturday," she whispered. "I have heaps of things to say to you, and how am I to get them said if you only call once a year and time that one visit so very badly?"

Now this speech might be nothing more than a little piece of friendliness, intended to show that Miss Huntley had not forgotten an intimacy which had once seemed to be pleasant to her; nevertheless, it sent Brian downstairs with a heart so full of good-will towards all mankind that the prospect of walking down the street with his brother was rather welcome to him than not. "Let us agree to blot out the past," he was inclined to say, "perhaps I judged you too hardly. Anyhow, the worst is over now; I shall not be in danger of dying of want again, and it was no fault of yours that I nearly starved myself once."

And, indeed, it was just as well that he was in so generous a mood; for Gilbert's first words were words of reproach and by no means of repentance.

"You know how to nurse a grudge and pay it off in due season, Brian," he remarked. "Do you consider that we are quits now, or have you any idea of coming down to Kingscliff and working for the Conservative candidate against me? I dare say your support would just about enable him to carry the election, and the county generally would be delighted to see me beaten by your influence. I haven't as many friends as I used to have, you will be glad to hear."

That was not quite what Brian had expected; but

he returned a soft answer. "I doubt whether I shall ever go back to Kingscliff now," said he, "and I'm sure I wish you success, Gilbert. If you have lost friends, it hasn't been through me; for I have never seen a soul from the neighbourhood since I left home, except Monckton."

"The exception counts for something, perhaps; but the mere fact of your leaving home in the way that you did was enough to set people's tongues going; especially as they soon found out that you refused to hold any communication with me. As for your wishing me success, that is very kind of you; but you must excuse my saying that I would rather have had the chance of buying the Manor House than any number of empty wishes."

"Well," said Brian, "you heard me tell Miss Huntley just now why I couldn't offer you the Manor House."

"And I heard her answer. My dear fellow, neither she nor anybody else will ever live in that crumbling ruin, and I shouldn't mind laying you short odds that it passes out of her possession before the end of the year. Most likely I shall have to purchase it myself at some ridiculous figure—if that is any satisfaction to you. Well, as I say, you have paid off old scores. When once a man has got a fixed idea into his head it is no use arguing with him, I know, and I suppose you will always look upon me as a swindler. Yet the fact remains that I have done simply what seemed to me to be right, and I should still be only too glad if you would allow me to hand you over the money which I shouldn't have been too proud to take from you, if our positions had been reversed."

"I don't want money; I have enough," answered Brian a little curtly.

The two brothers had turned out of Park Lane and were walking at a slow pace down Upper Grosvenor Street. Suddenly Brian stood still. "Look here, Gilbert," said he, "I don't think you have done right, so I can't say that I think so. It appears to me that you have gone dead against the poor old governor's wishes throughout—I don't mean only as regards myself, but about that sale of the building-land to Buswell. You must know that he would have done almost anything rather than that. But then, as Monckton says, you may have felt justified in disregarding his wishes; and I suppose many fellows would. Perhaps I am too proud to take money from you; but I'm not too proud to beg your pardon if I've done you an injustice. I don't know whether you quite understand how I feel about it."

"I don't know that I do," answered Gilbert, laughing; "but I know that I shall be very glad to be friends with you again, old man. And you certainly need not trouble yourself to beg my pardon."

He spoke with great cordiality and sincerity, and with no sense of shame whatever. The lie that he had told after his father's death, the treachery to which he had not been able to descend without a good deal of compunction, had faded from his memory, or, at the least, had fallen back into a dim recess thereof, beyond reach of present disturbance. No doubt he had disregarded Sir Brian's wishes, and no doubt, also, he had been justified in disregarding them. He was pleased with himself, and pleased with his brother too. At last,

then, this troublesome and rather scandalous quarrel was to come to an end!

And now with much patience and good-humour, he began to point out how he had had really no choice in the matter of that building-land. "Nobody likes to see his estate diminishing; but if he can't make both ends meet, what is he to do? It's very much your own case. You didn't want to sell; but you found that you must, and so did I. Besides, when all's said and done, there is such a thing as public spirit. The Kingscliff people would have had a very fair cause of complaint against me if I had gone on playing dog in the manger with them." And a good deal more to the like effect.

But Brian was not much impressed by this kind of reasoning, nor in truth was it quite as easy to him to make friends as it was to Gilbert. In his brother's sincerity he was determined to believe, and perhaps that was why he shrank from listening to explanations. He did not know that in so determining he had set before himself a simple impossibility.

At the corner of Grosvenor Square they parted. "Good-bye," Gilbert said, with a little nod and a wave of his hand. "We shall meet on Saturday, if I don't see you sooner."

CHAPTER VI.

A QUIET DINNER.

OF late, when, in the intervals of composition, Brian had relieved a weary brain by drifting into dreams of blissful impossibilities, he had pictured to himself some such scene as a crowded theatre, a young *maestro* bow-

ing in response to the plaudits of the audience, and at his elbow a beautiful lady, with clear brown eyes, who seemed to participate in his triumph, and who whispered in his ear a word or two, more precious to him than thunders of cheering or columns of flattering criticism. Or, perchance, he might fancy himself sitting at the organ of some great cathedral, such as St. Paul's or Westminster Abbey; and, perhaps, lingering on one of the benches, after the rest of the congregation had dispersed, the same lady might be discernible, and in her brown eyes the dawning of a not displeased consciousness that that noble instrument was saying to her something which the player did not venture to say by word of mouth. Or, again, it might be the old home at Kingscliff that rose up and became distinct from among those shadowy scenes; and the blue sea was dancing and laughing in the sunshine, and the brown sails of the fishing-boats were stealing slowly across the bay, and in the foreground was the Manor House, renovated and surrounded with flower-beds, and dear old Halcombe Head was looming, as of yore, out of a silvery mist. And this same lady with the clear brown eyes, gazing down from the heights, was saying that, after all, there was something better in the world than wealth or rank or ambition, or even fame, and that, having found that better thing, she asked nothing more of fortune.

But, of course, it required no slight force of imagination to place words of that nature in the mouth of the particular lady in question; and, indeed, these dreams and fanciful attributions of his own sentiments to one who had never shown the faintest sign of sharing them

were but a harmless and rather foolish pastime, at which Brian was ready enough to laugh when he laid down his pipe and went back to work again. He was not even sure that they were his own sentiments. Possibly he was becoming ambitious after a fashion; at any rate he was conscious of a great desire to succeed in the task which he had undertaken. He thought, too, that he would succeed, for he knew that he had never done better work of its kind, and Phipps was lavish of praise and sanguine prophecies. Love may be the best thing that the world has to give; but it is not the only thing, and a man who is worth his salt can very well make shift to do without it if need be. Thus Brian was wont to reason with himself, feeling, as he had felt for a long time past, that his path in life had already diverged too widely from Beatrice Huntley's to admit of any permanent reunion. He forbore to question Phipps with regard to her rumoured engagement. The first news of it had given him something of a shock, but when that passed off he saw how ridiculous it was on his part to be startled by an event which was absolutely certain to occur sooner or later. Nor did he know anything at all against Stapleford, who seemed to be a pleasant, unassuming, gentleman-like fellow. Assuredly she might do worse than marry him, and it was scarcely to be supposed that, in London or elsewhere, she could find a man in all respects worthy to be her husband.

This was a very reasonable and sensible view to take, but it did not prevent Brian from feeling a little annoyed when, just as he reached Sir Joseph Huntley's door on the evening for which he had been invited a

very smart brougham dashed up, out of which jumped Lord Stapleford. He had not bargained for that. One may yield a tacit consent to the decrees of *dira necessitas*, but it is another matter to stand by and see them carried into effect.

Stapleford, unconscious of being objectionable in any man's eyes, ran hastily up the steps and clapped Brian on the shoulder. "Dining here, Segrave?" he asked. "That's all right! I can tell you, if you don't know it, that you'll get a first-rate dinner. Poor old Joe isn't much to look at, and hasn't got much to say for himself, but everybody must acknowledge that both his cook and his cellar are beyond all praise."

Despite this handsome encomium, which in due course was fully justified, Brian was not best pleased with the feast to which he had been bidden, or with those who entertained him at it. Sir Joseph certainly was not much to look at, and if he had anything to say for himself he did not say it to our hero, while Lady Clementina appeared to think that she had done all that was required of her by extending the tips of her fingers to him. The fact was that they knew him only as the man to whom Beatrice had paid an exorbitant price for a house which they hoped that she would never inhabit. But what was much worse than the coolness of their greeting was that Beatrice herself, after she had said "How do you do?" and had introduced him to her relations, turned away immediately and began to talk to somebody else. There were a good many other people in the long room, people whom Brian did not know, and, as he said to himself, with a touch of ill-humour, did not want to know. Gilbert

was apparently very much at home among those smartly dressed representatives of modern society; doubtless Gilbert at a dinner-party in Park Lane was quite the right man in the right place. "But I came here on a fool's errand," thought Brian ruefully, "and I ought to have known better, and I wish to heaven I had stayed at home!"

After what seemed to him a very long period of waiting, he was delivered over to a vivacious little woman with a fuzzy head of hair, who had not been seated beside him at the dinner-table for five minutes before she discovered him to be a complete outsider. Society in London, as in other places, great and small, is composed of persons who for the most part dislike outsiders. To make conversation to an outsider demands an effort; you must discover his tastes, his occupations, and something of his history. And why should anybody take all that trouble, when it is so much more amusing to talk to those whose ways and interests are the same as your own? Brian's neighbour troubled neither herself nor him long. Fortunately, she was provided with a more congenial companion on her right hand, so that there was no discourtesy in ignoring her, and listening to such snatches as could be caught of the animated dialogue that was taking place on the other side of the table between Beatrice, Gilbert, and Stapleford. Not that the listener's part was particularly agreeable, or that the odds and ends of speech which reached his ears were of a nature to reward him for his pains. There is a kind of talk which is not without charm when addressed to one's self, but which sounds rather trivial and silly when addressed to others.

Brian had never seen Miss Huntley flirt before; he was disappointed to find that she could do so with as much apparent enjoyment as other women, and it did not at all mend matters that she should be flirting with two men at once. He had thought her above that sort of thing. And surely it was a little odd that she should not have even a glance to bestow upon one who was only sitting opposite to her at that moment in compliance with her own urgent request! Upon the whole, Brian could not remember that he had ever in his life enjoyed himself less—even at a dinner-party.

After the ladies had left the room the conversation took a political turn, as a matter of course, for just then everybody was talking politics. A Conservative administration had been formed, in which no place had been found for Sir Joseph Huntley, his exclusion, according to general rumour, being due to his conviction of the impossibility of governing Ireland without a renewal of the Crimes Act. Ministers were accused of having entered into a Parnellite alliance, a course of action which was at that time held to be peculiarly heinous by their opponents; and several of those who were assembled round Sir Joseph's dinner-table tried to draw their host upon these points, but they met with no success. He replied phlegmatically that a satisfactory method of governing Ireland had not yet been discovered by either political party; that he did not believe in the existence of any compact between Lord Salisbury and Mr. Parnell; but that he was not in the secrets of the Ministry, and consequently could not divulge them. Lord Stapleford, who had earned the reputation of being one of the coolest young men in England, asked him

point-blank whether office had been offered to him, and to this question he made no answer at all.

Then there was a great discussion about the probable result of the coming election, the general opinion appearing to be that, under any circumstances, the Radicals must come into power.

"What do you think about it?" inquired Stapleford, turning to Gilbert. "You're a Radical, ain't you?"

"I am a Liberal," replied Gilbert. "The best-informed people say they don't know what to expect, so my opinion isn't worth much. Everything, I should think will depend upon what may happen in the course of the summer and autumn. If we were to go to the country to-morrow I believe we should increase our majority."

"Upon my soul, I believe you would!" cried Stapleford, getting up. "I believe this country is utterly rotten; I believe the electors don't care a toss whether Russia gets India or not; I believe they wouldn't splutter and bluster for more than a week if O'Donovan Rossa were to be crowned in Dublin. They didn't consider that England was disgraced when Gordon was left to be murdered, or rather they didn't object in the least to England's being disgraced. What's the odds so long as the great Liberal party can be hoisted into power again upon the shoulders of an army of deluded chawbacons? The whole thing is sickening and disgusting, and I'll be hanged if I'm going to waste the summer in struggling against fate. I shall play cricket instead."

"That," remarked Sir Joseph deliberately, "is just the spirit in which a crisis ought not to be faced. If

the educated minority lose patience and temper we shall be swept off to ruin by the mob, and by the agitators and theorists who lead the mob; and we shall not be much less to blame than they."

But Stapleford did not wait for the end of the harangue thus initiated. "Come on, Segrave," said he, taking Brian by the arm; "let's go up-stairs and talk to the ladies. If we want to be taught our duties as good citizens we can read the leading articles to-morrow morning." And as they mounted the staircase—that celebrated marble staircase which Sir Joseph's father had brought from Genoa at a prodigious expense—he added: "Sorry to have dragged you away before you got a chance of a cigarette, my dear Segrave; but between you and me, Beatrice told me to bring you to her as soon as I could. She says she wants to talk to you in private."

This was welcome news; but perhaps it would have been more welcome if it had been otherwise conveyed. Brian failed to appreciate the adroitness of the diplomacy which had converted Stapleford into an ambassador; for he did not know how difficult it had lately become to that young man's cousin to keep him at a distance for ten consecutive minutes. And so, when Miss Huntley had beckoned our hero into a small, dimly-lighted room opening out of the drawing-room, and had motioned him to take a chair near her own, her first remark was:

"You look portentously gloomy, not to say sulky. Has your dinner disagreed with you; or is it only that you dislike the society of your fellow-creatures as much as ever?"

"Well," answered Brian, "you know I told you long ago that I am out of my element in society, and I had no idea that you were going to have a party to-night. You asked me to dine quietly."

"To the best of my belief, you did dine very quietly indeed. At least, if you became noisy, it must have been after I lost sight of you. And this isn't a party; we never dine quite alone during the months of June and July."

"And after dinner, I suppose, you go to half-a-dozen crushes and balls. Do you really enjoy that kind of life?"

"I enjoy it well enough for a time; if it went on all the year round it would grow wearisome, no doubt, like every other kind of life. A man, I grant you, might be better employed, and, to do you justice, that is what most of you seem to think; but a woman's opportunities of enjoyment, you must remember, are much more limited than yours. Just for a few years—so long as her good looks, if she has any, last—she may play quite an important part in the little corner of the world which she inhabits; but when once she begins to go down the hill, her life is over, and only existence remains. I don't think you ought to blame us for making hay while the sun shines. However, I didn't bring you here to talk to you about myself; I want you to give me a full, true, and particular account of all that you have done and suffered from the date of your leaving Kingscliff up to the present time."

"That would take far too long, and it would be a very dull narrative into the bargain."

"But if I want to hear it?"

"Really it wouldn't interest you."

"You won't tell me the story? Very well, then, I will tell it to you, and you will see that it is neither long nor dull, when concisely stated. In November last you accepted the post of organist at St. Jude's, North Streatham, and held it until after Easter, when you were pressed to resign in consequence of an entanglement with a particularly vulgar and unattractive young woman who used to sing in your choir. Various versions were given of the affair, and hers seems to have been plausible; but you declined to give any version at all, so you had to retire. After that you returned to London, where you remained for a considerable time without employment, and if Mr. Monckton had not found you out and made you listen to reason, it is quite likely that you would have enlisted in the Life Guards, or done something else equally desperate. As it was you reluctantly consented to sell the Manor House to an unworthy person, and since then you have been engaged upon the composition of an opera, which will probably be produced in the course of next winter, and will take the town by storm. I believe that is a tolerably accurate account of your proceedings, so far as it goes."

"It is accurate—so far as it goes," assented Brian wonderingly; "but how did you discover all this?"

"I scorn to deceive you. I catechised Mr. Phipps, and when I had found out all that he knew, which wasn't much, what did I do but invite Mr. Potter to lunch with me one day when Clementina was out. And the world is very small, as I dare say you have heard many people remark before now; and if Miss Joy should

have an old school friend living at Streatham, and if her friend's name should be Mrs. Peareth, would that be such a very extraordinary coincidence? What does seem to me extraordinary—much more so than my liking to amuse myself for two or three months in the year, for example—is your determination to hold aloof from old friends who, after all, have done nothing to deserve such treatment?”

“But—here I am,” said Brian, smiling.

“Yes, here you are, because you couldn't very well help yourself; and ever since you entered the house you have been vowing inwardly that you won't enter it again in a hurry.”

“Now how can you tell that, when you have never so much as looked at me?”

“I can see people without looking at them; and I know, without being told, when certain people are horribly bored and very cross. It is inexcusable to be cross upon such slight provocation. I was at least as much bored as you were during dinner——”

“Then all I can say,” interrupted Brian, “is that I never in my life saw boredom more skilfully disguised.”

“Thank you; I can accept that compliment with a clear conscience. I only wish I could return it.” And then she proceeded to read him a lecture upon the duties which each member of a civilised community owes to his neighbours, and which she declared that he was as much bound to discharge as to pay rates and taxes. If he wished to lead the life of a hermit, he ought to be consistent and seek out a new Thebaïd for himself somewhere or other; but in large cities one

must give and take, and no one should have the vanity to think that he can be quite independent. Why, even an accomplished musician might find that it was worth while to have a sprinkling of friends and well-wishers in the house, on bringing out a new opera, instead of an assembly of total strangers.

He listened to her good-natured scolding without any displeasure; for indeed this, like her cross-examination of Phipps and Mr. Potter, proved that she still took an interest in him and desired to be his friend. More than that he had already decided that he would never ask or expect of her. Then, when she went on to put a great many questions to him about the new opera, and the probable date of its production, and the singers who were likely to appear in it, and so forth, he was very willing to give her all the information that she asked for. But of herself and her plans, and her cousin Stapleford (whom she had accused by implication of boring her), she did not choose to speak; and perhaps it may have been disinclination to enter upon particulars of that kind that made her open the piano which stood in a corner of the room, and insist upon it that Brian should play over to her a few airs from his forthcoming work.

He protested laughingly that Phipps would never forgive a premature disclosure of what could not become public property for another four months at least; but she replied that she was not the public, and that, besides, Mr. Phipps would not be informed of his indiscretion, so he yielded.

Now to get Brian seated before a piano or an organ was very much the same thing as putting Lord Staple-

ford on to bowl, or asking Sir Joseph Huntley whether he happened to know anything about the report of the Royal Commission on Industrial Dwellings. After he had strummed some fragments of airs, it was easy enough to lead him on to Schumann, Chopin, and others of his favourite composers, and in a very short time he was blissfully unconscious of all external circumstances, save and excepting the presence of Beatrice Huntley by his side. Thus it was that he did not notice any accession to his audience until Lady Clementina advanced from the background, where she and several of her guests had been standing for some little time, and began to say all manner of amiable and complimentary things. Lady Clementina did not know very much about music, but she liked to pose as a patroness of genius and she was always eager to get hold of the last social novelty, whether it might be an Indian Maharajah, or a celebrated actress, or an adventurous explorer. In the course of the evening someone had informed her that she was entertaining an angel unawares, in the shape of a composer of the greatest promise; otherwise the delicacy of Brian's touch and his masterly rendering of difficult passages might possibly have escaped her. As it was, she paid full homage to both.

"Why did you not tell us that you are writing an opera?" she asked naïvely. "I shall make a point of going to see it if I am in London when it is produced." Then she expressed a gracious hope that they might meet again before long, and that he would look in at her ball which was to take place in about a fortnight's time, adding that she would send him a card to refresh his memory.

Brian was amused and in no wise affronted by this rapid growth of cordiality on the part of his hostess. He was conscious, although she was not (for indeed she had paid no attention to him), that he had been absurdly sulky and bearish earlier in the evening, and he was not sorry to have an opportunity of proving to Miss Huntley that he recognized the justice of the admonition which had been addressed to him. Therefore, much as he hated balls, he accepted Lady Clementina's invitation, thereby earning a smile of approval from Beatrice who, as she wished him good night, whispered,

"I am glad to see that you are in a better humour now than an hour ago."

Well, certainly he was in a good humour, and, as he walked away, it seemed to him that the very streets of London had assumed a more kindly and hospitable air. He thought he was pleased because Beatrice Huntley had shown him that she was not fickle in her friendships; but if he had been given to self-analysis he might have discovered that what pleased him was not so much that as her passing hint that she preferred his company to Lord Stapleford's.

CHAPTER VII.

GILBERT ASTONISHES HIMSELF.

If any credit be due to a lady who knows how to content three admirers, or potential admirers, at one time and in one place, Miss Huntley must be admitted to have managed her little dinner-party very well; for

not only Brian, but also Gilbert and Stapleford went their respective ways in a contented frame of mind, while each of the two latter flattered himself that he had received some distinctive marks of her favour. As for Gilbert, he thought that he understood women pretty thoroughly; and as a matter of fact, he did, perhaps, understand them as well as any one can whose orderly habit of mind leads him to classify all subjects, whether human or other, and who, in explaining conduct, is apt to make but a scanty allowance for inconsistency and impulse. He believed Miss Huntley to be a woman who fancied herself ambitious, but was in reality rather combative; a woman who enjoyed power, but enjoyed the pursuit of it still more, and one to whom a position of mere dignified ease offered no attractions at all. The type is not an uncommon one: he had met with several examples of it, and had noted the development of the same in various directions. It seemed to him most unlikely that Beatrice Huntley would ever marry Stapleford, whose station was hardly high enough to tempt her, while his personal qualities were not of a kind to excite her interest or sympathy. It would be a great deal more in keeping with her character to bestow her hand and fortune upon some man who contemplated fighting his way to fame in public life; nor was it at all surprising that he should arrive at this conclusion, since she herself had more than once suggested it to him in words of little ambiguity.

Now Mr. Buswell's advice to him, that he should espouse this beautiful heiress, was doubtless, in the abstract, excellent; and if he thought, as Buswell did,

that his chance of securing the prize was by no means a bad one, vanity had little enough to say to that assumption. He was not in love with Beatrice, nor was she, to the best of his belief, in love with him; but, for the reasons above mentioned, he deemed it not improbable that she might accept him as her husband, while he, on his side, had a liking and admiration for her which seemed amply sufficient to meet the requirements of the case. Only then, there was Kitty Greenwood, whom he did love, to whom he had all but declared his love, and who, alas! had neither the fortune nor the qualities so desirable for the wife of an active politician.

For a long time he had shirked the dilemma towards which he was drifting; but he had to face it at length, and then he had to go through the process of talking himself over—a painful process, which, however, terminated, as it was sure to terminate, in his according himself plenary absolution. In short, it came to this, that he must choose between ambition and love; and he knew—although he did not quite like making the admission—that love is fleeting, whereas ambition remains with us even when we have already one foot in the grave. For Kitty's own sake, it would be better to play her false—supposing that the transfer of his allegiance could be properly so described—than to obtain her consent to a union which would only too probably result in disenchantment and disappointment. Every day, too, that he spent in London strengthened his conviction that rusticity would never suit him. He went a great deal into society; he renewed acquaintance with many old friends; and there was scarcely an

evening on which he did not meet Miss Huntley, to whom his attentions unquestionably appeared to be acceptable. It is true that every now and then she would startle him with some sudden half-ironical remark, as when one day, she inquired whether he had obtained an unlimited leave of absence from Miss Greenwood, or when, on another occasion, she asked him why he had not taken the precaution of bringing Captain Mitchell up to town with him; but he was able to put an interpretation upon these mild assaults which robbed them of any disquieting element; for, of course, his attachment to Kitty had been no secret to her, and it was natural enough that she should seek to remind him of it, now that times were changed.

To take an unlimited leave of absence appeared, in truth, to be the best way of freeing himself from bonds of which he could not altogether ignore the existence; and, on thinking the whole situation over, he decided to run down to Kingscliff for the inside of a week, make a few necessary arrangements and escape, if possible, without seeing or being seen by the Greenwoods. That the plan wore a somewhat ignoble aspect was not to be denied; but who, after all, can run away with dignity?

He mentioned to Miss Huntley that he proposed returning home for a day or two; and she said, with an amused look:

“Ah! To bid your friends good-bye, perhaps.”

“Well,” he answered, “I think I may remain away rather longer than I had intended.”

“I see. And it is well to be off with the old love before one is on with the new.”

She enjoyed his confusion for a few seconds and then explained: "Beckton is the old love, London is the new; I trust you don't think that I meant to accuse you of any worse kind of faithlessness. You may remember that I always told you you would not be able to stand Beckton for long."

"Did you? If you did, you were quite right. It is my home, of course; but I don't feel as if I could live there from January to December without a break. Beckton is—shall we say—a little narrow?"

"Yes; and you are so broad in your views. No wonder it won't hold you! Come back as soon as you can, then, and don't forget to say all that is civil from me to our friends at Morden."

"I hardly think I shall have time to call upon them," Gilbert answered.

Nevertheless, he was conscious of a powerful and imprudent longing to call upon them. He wanted to meet Kitty just once more upon the old footing; he wanted her—preposterous as such a wish may seem—to retain a kindly recollection of him; and although he felt it would be a gratuitous piece of folly to seek her out, he could not help hoping that chance might bring them together, if only for a few minutes. And so when, on the day after his return, he encountered Admiral Greenwood in the main street of Kingscliff, and when the Admiral, with his customary heartiness, said, "Come along with me, my dear boy, and the ladies will give you a cup of tea," he had not the resolution to excuse himself.

"I suppose you didn't happen to see your brother

in London, did you?" the old gentleman asked, after Gilbert had climbed into the mail-phaeton beside him.

To which Gilbert was glad to be able to reply: "Yes, indeed I did; and I'm sure you will rejoice with me when I tell you that we have agreed to bury our differences. I think Brian quite understands now that it was not possible to set my father's will aside."

"Come!" cried the Admiral; "that's good news. I never liked that will, nor pretended to like it; but as for setting it aside, why, as I've often said to Pollington and others, the thing couldn't be done without dishonesty. And so Brian sees that at last, does he? Poor fellow! it has been hard lines upon him; but I'm bound to say that it hasn't been over and above pleasant for you either; and you've kept your temper very well through it all. I congratulate you most sincerely, my dear fellow."

Praise from that quarter was the more welcome to Gilbert, because he knew very well that Admiral Greenwood had been only half pleased with him hitherto. A chain is no stronger than its weakest link, and that anxiety to be spoken well of by all men which had more than once stood in Gilbert's way through life was likely enough to do so again. He was quite aware of this; but that he was in any danger of being diverted from his present purpose thereby he did not believe; and if he was conscious of an unwonted sensation of nervousness when he reached Morden Court and was led by his host through the house to the lawn, where it appeared that the ladies had ordered the tea to be carried out, that was no more than the most deter-

mined of men might have experienced under the circumstances.

At the same time, it gave him a disagreeable sort of shock to see Mitchell, who was clad in cricketing flannels, seated on the grass beside Kitty's chair. He felt like a retiring Prime Minister encountering his successor; and, indeed, it is not necessary to be a Prime Minister in order to feel how lamentable a thing it is to be succeeded by one's inferior. Nor was the Admiral's method of announcing him exactly what he would have chosen.

"Here's Gilbert Segrave back," called out that worthy, but tactless individual; "and he brings us good tidings. Brian and he are friends again."

Mrs. Greenwood said she was so glad, and Kitty murmured a few words to the same effect, and Mitchell said nothing at all; after which there was an interval of silence. If he had only had the two ladies to deal with, Gilbert would have known how to turn the occasion to account by delicately hinting that the reconciliation alluded to had been due to his initiative alone; but in the presence of Mitchell he shrank from putting forward any such insinuations, because he was quite sure that that uncompromising naval officer would not believe a word of them. Formerly he had felt nothing but a good-humoured sort of contempt for Mitchell, his chaff, his horseplay, and his occasional downright rudeness; but now he disliked the man and rather dreaded him. The honesty of honest dullards—if they only knew it—is a force more than equal to the knavery of half-and-half knaves.

But it soon became evident that Mitchell would be

guilty of no discourtesy to any one that afternoon. He was in an unusually sober and taciturn mood; he spoke only when he was spoken to; he responded very briefly to Kitty's efforts to make him talk about the cricket-match which Kingscliff had just won by eight wickets against a neighbouring eleven; he drank his tea gloomily while the others chatted, and at length got up, stretched himself, sighed, and said he supposed he must be going.

He was not pressed to linger. On the contrary, Mrs. Greenwood rose with somewhat suspicious alacrity, saying, "Well, then, I will walk as far as the lodge with you; I promised to go and see the gardener's wife, who is bad with lumbago." For although Mrs. Greenwood was the most hospitable of women, she was also the best of mothers, and, for aught she knew, Mr. Segrave might have called with a special purpose in view. Indeed, a visible and unwonted embarrassment of manner on the part of Mr. Segrave made her hope that such was actually the case. The Admiral had already strolled away; so that Gilbert and Kitty were left to themselves, and could say what they pleased to one another without fear of being overheard or interrupted.

If Gilbert had felt embarrassed before, he ought to have felt doubly so now; but as a matter of fact he did not. Perhaps he was too self-engrossed to realize more than one side of the situation; at all events, he drew a long breath of relief and exclaimed—

"Thank goodness! we have got rid of that everlasting bore."

"Don't call him names," pleaded Kitty, with a ring of remorse in her voice; "you don't know how good he is!"

"Perhaps I don't," Gilbert confessed. "If you come to that, I'm pretty sure that I don't. He doesn't seem to me to be good for much, except to get in the way; but possibly I may be prejudiced, because he has so very often got in my way."

To this Kitty made no rejoinder; and a long pause ensued. It was a still, warm afternoon; what little breeze there was came fitfully from the westward, scarcely ruffling the surface of the bay, although a long swell, rolling lazily in from the Atlantic, fringed the curve of the shore with silver. The roses, which were the pride of Mrs. Greenwood's heart, were in full bloom; butterflies were hovering over the geraniums and heliotropes and calceolarias, which stretched in brilliant bands of colour to the boundary of the garden, and there was a sleepy hum of insects in the air. The most practical of men will grow dreamy at times; and Gilbert, succumbing to the influence of all these well-known sights and sounds, which recalled memories of former summers to his mind, began to dream. What, after all, he asked himself, constitutes happiness? He had been very happy in bygone days, sitting, as he was sitting now, with Kitty beside him, and looking forward to a career which differed but little in essentials from that which he still contemplated. He had been going to fight his way to fame and fortune at the bar; he had always intended to make the bar a stepping-stone to Parliament; and ever, as the prize and crown of all his efforts, he had set before himself the winning of Kitty Greenwood as his bride. Why had his point of view changed? Why had political life assumed the first place in his affections, now that it had been brought

so much more nearly within his grasp? Was it even certain that it really had assumed that place? That the pursuit of happiness is the one and only aim of mankind was an axiom which Gilbert considered to have been proved to demonstration. Some persons like to see their speeches in the newspapers; others like cultivating roses; others again derive pleasure from devoting themselves to what are called good works—nursing the sick, relieving the poor, visiting the fatherless and the widows in their affliction, and so forth. In nine cases out of ten the result is inappreciable, and in all the motive is the same. Gilbert's theory was that people not only will not but cannot do what they dislike. And if happiness—which is probably unattainable by any means—should be more nearly approached by marrying your own love than by writing M.P. after your name, or even Right Honourable before it? But these were only vague speculations, in which it was the more pleasant to indulge because they were a little bit dangerous. He felt like a man who has allowed himself to be drawn into temptation, not meaning to yield to it, yet not absolutely certain that he will be able to resist it, and to whom that element of peril is in some sort a substitute for the forbidden fruit. He fancied himself telling Kitty that he loved her, that he always had and always would love her, and he wondered what her answer would be. That is, he wondered what the terms of it would be; for he had not much doubt as to the substance. Then, all of a sudden, there flashed before him the other and the less agreeable side of the picture. He was convinced that, when once his desertion of her had become manifest, she

would marry Mitchell. She was not strong-minded; she would give way to pressure; she would end by becoming very well satisfied with her good-natured, stupid husband, and her children and her daily household duties.

"Oh, hang it all!" groaned Gilbert aloud.

His companion stared at him in surprise. She had been speaking for some minutes past, saying how rejoiced she was to think that Brian had at last come round to a better frame of mind, and hoping that perhaps he would now return to Kingscliff and see his old friends, even if it should not suit him to remain permanently among them. "Don't you wish him to come back?" she asked innocently, in response to the above ejaculation.

"Eh? Oh yes; of course I shall be awfully glad if he will. I—I beg your pardon; I was thinking of something else," answered Gilbert. And then, abruptly, "Talking of Mitchell—what has he been doing to make you proclaim his goodness so emphatically? You used to think him rather a bore, if I am not mistaken."

Kitty flushed a little. "I know I did," she answered, in penitent accents; "but it was horrid of me, and very ungrateful too. He has always been so very kind to me, and I remember that when I was a child I used to look upon him as quite a hero. He would be a hero, I am sure, if there were any fighting to be done."

"Oh, I have no doubt that he can fight as well as another," said Gilbert in a dissatisfied tone; "but a first-rate fighter—even a prize-fighter—may be a bore. Or do you think that that is impossible?"

He spoke so sharply that Kitty's cheeks became

still more rosy as she replied, "I don't know—yes; of course, it is possible. But Captain Mitchell is not a bore; and I am very sorry that I ever called him anything of the kind."

This was more than Gilbert could endure. "You are trying to deceive yourself!" he exclaimed; "you won't succeed. Or, if you do, you will repent when it is too late, and when you have bound yourself for life to a man whom you can't love. It isn't enough that he should love you—I quite believe that he does; but what difference does that make? You can't marry all the men who love you. And I don't believe that Mitchell has it in him to love you a tenth part as much as I do!"

The words were out of his mouth before he could arrest them; for the very first time in his life, he was swept away by sheer passionate impulse. And, instead of cursing himself for a fool, he rejoiced and exulted in his folly. It may be said without exaggeration that during the next half-hour he was a perfectly happy man. It is true that his reason had told him long ago that Kitty loved him; but to receive that assurance from her own lips was somehow an altogether different and far more delightful thing. What if all his fine schemes had been brought to nought! What if Buswell and the crew of Kingscliff land-grabbers should refuse to vote for him, since he could not approach them with the title-deeds of the Manor House in his hand! The world was well lost.

Most of us, unhappily, know how agreeable it is to cease struggling against the temptation to do wrong; but to give way to an overpowering craving to do right

is a rarer and, doubtless, more refined form of gratification. Gilbert, appreciating this to the full, did not mar it by any reference to the magnitude of the sacrifice that he was making. He was greatly pleased with himself, and with all the world; he even found that he had a little pity at the service of his impotent rival when Kitty told him, as a profound secret, that poor Mitchell had proposed to her a few days before, and that she had been compelled to reject him for reasons which she stated at full length, but which it is needless to reproduce here. And after a time the old people returned; and the great news was communicated to them; and Gilbert having been persuaded to remain to dinner, the Admiral produced a bottle of his famous old Madeira.

Thus it came to pass that Mr. Segrave did not go back to London to finish the season, but stayed at home in peace and contentment, which nothing occurred to disturb. For at this time Mr. Buswell was away, and there was a political lull, and the weather, for once, was all that could be desired by a pair of happy lovers.

CHAPTER VIII.

MISS JOY IS ORACULAR.

UPON taking a calm review of circumstances, Brian came to the conclusion that it would be a foolish and unnecessary thing to shun Beatrice Huntley's society. He now felt more sure of himself. He was not going to be guilty a second time of the *gaucherie* of showing temper because, forsooth, she did not choose to bestow

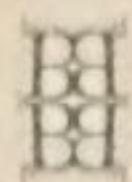
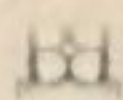
her attention exclusively upon him; he was determined to accept frankly the friendship which was all that she had to offer him and more than he had any right to claim; and if he should be called upon, from time to time, to bear a sharp pang or two he would know how to conceal these. To see her, to hear her voice, some times perhaps to exchange a few words with her, would be ample compensation for such inevitable trials of his fortitude.

Nothing could have been more sensible than these resolutions, but what they may have been worth it is impossible to say, for the simple reason that Brian found no opportunity of putting them into practice. He called in Park Lane, thinking that he ought to do so after eating Sir Joseph's salt; but nobody was at home; and although his brother, who one evening did him the honour to dine with him at his club, informed him that Miss Huntley "went everywhere," this knowledge was of little avail to a man who happened to go nowhere. Gilbert, as we know, was more fortunate, and Brian learnt from him that Beatrice's engagement to Lord Stapleford was generally spoken of as a probable event.

"But it isn't announced yet, is it?" Brian asked.

"Oh no!" answered Gilbert, smiling; "it isn't announced yet."

He had the air of knowing more than he chose to say; but Brian did not interrogate him further. It struck him that there was a suspicion of mockery in his brother's smile, and he had no desire to listen to a repetition of the warnings which had been addressed to him from that quarter on a bygone occasion. After all, Beatrice's destiny was beyond his control or influence;



he would be told of it, no doubt, when she had made up her mind what it was to be—he did not think that her mind was made up yet—and meanwhile he had his work to occupy and console him. A day or two before that appointed for Lady Clementina's ball he received a post-card, on the back of which was written, in Miss Huntley's large, flowing hand, "Don't forget the 16th.—B. H." To be sure, there was not much danger of his overlooking the one and only invitation that lay upon his writing-table; but the reminder was very welcome to him as evidence that the fact of his having been invited was remembered by one whose own engagements were so numerous.

On the evening of the day above-mentioned he dressed himself with unusual care and paid particular attention to his white tie. He was quite ready by ten o'clock, but, despite his inclinations, remained steadfast and immovable for another two hours; because he had been given to understand that London ballrooms seldom begin to fill until near midnight. Consequently, when he reached Park Lane he found the hall and staircase crowded with dense masses of humanity, and had no small difficulty in wriggling his way up to the landing, where his hostess stood, magnificent in diamonds and old lace. Lady Clementina's balls were always crowded, because they were always admirably done. The age in which we live is reproached, justly or unjustly, with being one in which wealth is all-powerful; nor can it be denied that to give a successful ball in these days costs a great deal more than it did a quarter of a century ago. Lady Clementina's command of ready money was practically unbounded; so that she had little trouble

in outshining the financiers', bankers' and brewers' wives who were her most formidable competitors and in assembling all London under her roof whenever she was so minded. Unfortunately for her, she did not greatly covet distinction of that particular kind, but it had come to be expected of her that she should hold two or three such functions in the course of the season, and, as Sir Joseph, who detested but acquiesced in them, was wont to remark, they were good for trade, if they had no other merit.

Brian, in due course of time, was swept upstairs and shook hands with her, and she looked as if she had not the ghost of an idea who he was. Then he penetrated into the ballroom, where the banks of flowers, the huge blocks of clear ice, and the little fountains which were splashing in every recess might have excited his admiration if he had had any eyes for these adjuncts. But he was there to see, and, if possible, to speak to Beatrice Huntley, not to draw comparisons between Lady Clementina's entertainment and Mrs. Guldenmark's, or Lady Porter's; and his stature enabling him to look over the heads of the throng, he presently made out the object of his search, standing not many yards away from him, and surrounded by a phalanx of black coats, of which Stapleford's was one.

The moment that she caught sight of him she beckoned him to approach, and when, by dint of a little unceremonious shoving, he had managed to obey her signal, she bent her head towards him and whispered hurriedly, "Don't go away yet."

"I have only just come," Brian answered.

"So much the better. Can you stand this for an

other hour and a half, do you think? If you can, you might look about for me then. I am not going to dance to-night; but I can see that there will be no peace or freedom for me before two o'clock. Will you wait?"

"Of course I will," said Brian; and thereupon she gave him a nod by way of dismissal.

He executed a movement of retreat towards the wall, and stationed himself in a sort of backwater, out of the eddying human stream, well content to bide his time. If Beatrice had told him to wait five hours, instead of only one and a half, he would have done her bidding with perfect cheerfulness. But, indeed, this ball did not seem to him to be nearly as dull an affair as those of which he had had previous cognisance. At Kingscliff, where everybody knew him, and where non-dancers were looked upon as social defaulters, he had always felt that he would rather submit to any imaginable form of penance than look on, all the night through, at a number of people bobbing round and round a hot room, with the chance of being himself compelled, at any moment, to go bobbing round also. Here it was quite different. No one noticed him, nor did he recognise a single acquaintance, except Sir Hector Buckle, looking very smart and spruce, who passed once through the rooms and vanished; and it was amusing enough, for once in a way, to catch a glimpse of the so-called great world. Some of the persons who passed close to him were really great. There were Cabinet Ministers among them, and Foreign Ambassadors, covered with orders, and Brian distinctly heard one of the latter say to a lady, "*Madame, je vous préviens que la Russie ne peut plus reculer et que la guerre est inévitable.*" This

was most interesting; but the other scraps of conversation which reached his ears were scarcely of equal importance. He gathered from them that all these people had either come from Mrs. A.'s or were going on to Lady B.'s, and their chief anxiety appeared to be to find out whether those whom they met were engaged upon the same exciting programme. Also, he noticed, that a large majority of these pleasure-seekers were past middle age, and he wondered what could be the inducement that kept them out of bed at a time of life when they ought to have been thinking seriously about economising their vital forces. The old women, of course, might have marriageable daughters; but the old men would surely have been happier at home. And where were all the young men?

But these notes and queries were put a stop to when a lady of noble proportions, who had been carried through the doorway on the top of the flood, extricated herself with a vigorous plunge, and landed breathlessly by Brian's side.

"Well, Mr. Segrave," said she, "I did think that you would remember me; but I suppose I am not the sort of person whom any one would expect to meet in a grand London ballroom."

"I am very glad to meet you, at all events," answered Brian; and indeed it was a real pleasure to him to recognise Miss Joy, beaming all over with good-humour, as of yore, and wearing the selfsame ruby velvet gown with the tail of which she had once swept Gilbert's chair from under him. "I am like the Doge of Venice at Versailles," he added; "astonishment at finding myself where I am exhausts my capacity for

wonder. But it isn't very wonderful that you should be in the same house as Miss Huntley, is it?"

"It is rather wonderful that I should be in *this* house," Miss Joy replied. "I am supposed to be on furlough just now, and of course my name doesn't appear in Lady Clementina's visiting-list; but Beatrice insisted upon it that I should come to-night, because she knows how much I enjoy spectacles of this kind. So I put my pride in my pocket and came."

"We seem to be in the same boat," observed Brian, "and we can enjoy the spectacle together. I would ask you to do me the honour of dancing with me, only——"

"You would meet with a polite, but decisive refusal if you did," interrupted Miss Joy, laughing. "Do you think that I have no shame, and that I am incapable of distinguishing between Kingscliff and Park Lane? But I'll tell you what you might do for me, if you were inclined to be good-natured—you might take me downstairs and give me something to eat."

Of course he was quite ready to do that, and by the exertion of some physical force he succeeded in piloting his companion down to the supper-room, where, as need hardly be said, everything that art and luxury could achieve in the culinary line was at her disposal. However, he soon discovered that Miss Joy's request had not been prompted by any greedy appetite, for she would take nothing but a morsel of aspic and half a glass of champagne, and as soon as she had finished this frugal refreshment she drew him aside into one of the smaller rooms, which for the moment was untenanted, saying: "Now we shall be able to talk comfortably."

And when she had settled herself down upon a sofa, it was an odd and rather disappointing thing to find that she wanted to talk about his brother, not, as usual, about the manifold perfections of her beloved patroness. Where was Gilbert? she asked. Did he propose to remain in London long? And why was he not at the ball? "I know he is in town, because Beatrice told me that she had met him several times; and perhaps he may be in the house now, though I don't think he can be, for I had a good look all round the rooms before I fell in with you."

"I believe he is in town," answered Brian, who had not been informed of his brother's return to Beckton; "but I can't tell you much about his movements. I dare say Miss Huntley sees more of him than I do."

Miss Joy gave a dissatisfied grunt. "But I should have thought that, with this general election coming on in the autumn, it would be important for him to be upon the spot," she persisted. "Isn't he going home again soon?"

"Really, I don't know," replied Brian wonderingly. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I am naturally inquisitive; when I know something about people I always want to know more. Perhaps I know more than you suppose about the way in which you have been going on since we last met."

"I am aware that Mrs. Peareth is a friend of yours," said Brian.

"Oh, Beatrice told you that? Did she tell you that she made me take her out to Streatham and call upon the Peareths with her, so that she might learn the truth about your rupture with them? I think that was a very

pretty compliment to pay you. And, as luck would have it, who should come in while we were sitting there but that absurd little Mrs. Dubbin herself! You must indeed have been hard up for amusement before you took to flirting with *her!*”

“But I never did anything of the sort,” cried Brian indignantly. “I do hope that Miss Huntley—and you know better than to believe it of me!”

“I can believe anything of young men,” answered Miss Joy sententiously. “From what I have seen of them—and I have seen a good deal, first and last—I should say that there are no bounds to the folly that they are capable of, if encouraged by forward and vulgar girls. Mrs. Peareth took your part, however, I must confess, and said you had been very badly treated. As for Beatrice, she would never admit that you could do wrong. I don’t know whether you have found out what a high opinion she has of you.”

“Is that meant sarcastically?” inquired Brian.

“Oh no; she took a liking to you from the first; and when she takes likings of that description they are always strong ones.” Miss Joy paused for a moment and sighed. “I have often wished of late,” she continued meditatively, “that you were a lord, or a distinguished personage of some sort; because, if you were, you might fall in love with dear Beatrice and marry her. I shouldn’t have any fears for her future then.”

“Thank you,” said Brian, laughing, “your remarks have at least the merit of candour. But I didn’t know that lords and other distinguished personages were more susceptible than the rest of mankind.”

"I am sure you understand what I mean; it is Beatrice who is not susceptible, poor dear! No man has ever yet succeeded in touching her heart; in spite of which, situated as she is, it is almost inevitable that she should marry before long. I suppose you have heard rumours about her and Lord Stapleford. Well, do you know, I quite hope she will take him. He isn't brilliant; but he is honest and good-tempered, and what is better still, I think he really loves her. As his wife, she could take a leading position in society, and make interests of many kinds for herself. You see, the danger is that—putting love out of the question in the way that she does—she might be attracted by talent and plausibility. An unscrupulous man, who wanted her money for his own unselfish ends, might get her to take an interest in his career, especially if it were a political career; and then——"

"Are you thinking of any person in particular?" inquired Brian.

"There are always plenty of such persons about," answered Miss Joy evasively. "And she hasn't accepted Lord Stapleford yet."

"Perhaps he hasn't asked her yet."

"Oh, she hasn't allowed him to ask her. It is easy enough to keep a man from proposing to you; I could do that myself, though I have no pretension to be as adroit as she is. You needn't laugh. No greater ingenuity is required to protect me from troublesome suitors nowadays, I know; but I really was not so bad-looking once upon a time; and just at that moment I was thinking of a very eligible young man whom I once held at arm's length until he went off in a huff and

never came back again—which I was rather sorry for afterwards. But, as I was saying, Beatrice won't let Lord Stapleford come to the point; which shows that she is hesitating. It is arranged, I believe, that he is to meet us at Homburg next month; and then, I trust, she will give him his answer. It will be a very great pity if she dismisses a man who has so many good qualities and no defects, unless it be a defect to be rather commonplace."

Brian really could not concur. If Miss Huntley had not yet met any one for whom she could care as a wife ought to care for her husband, surely it would be better that she should remain unmarried until she did. What was there in her situation which rendered an immediate marriage so desirable? He had many arguments of undoubted weight to urge in support of his views and against Miss Joy's, and he was bringing them forward, one by one, when, to his horror he heard the clock on the mantelpiece strike three. "Good Heavens!" he exclaimed, "I had no idea that it was so late. I—I must take you upstairs again, if you don't mind; I have an engagement——"

"Off you go then!" returned Miss Joy, laughing at his dismayed face. "You can leave me here; I am big enough to take care of myself."

Perhaps it was not very polite; but he took her at her word. It would be too heartbreaking to have lost what might very likely be his last chance of an interview with Beatrice before she left London. He ran quickly up the staircase, which was almost deserted now and entered the ballroom, where the crowd, though less than it had been in the earlier part of the evening,

was still large. Seeing at a glance that Beatrice was neither among the dancers nor the spectators, he pursued his search through the adjoining room and discovered her at length, sitting quite alone beside an open window, in what appeared to be the library.

"I am so very sorry!" he began breathlessly. "I was talking to Miss Joy, and I didn't notice how the time was slipping away."

"I thought you had gone home to bed like a sensible man," she answered. "I am glad you found Miss Joy so fascinating, for I wasn't set at liberty as soon as I expected. Stapleford has only just left."

She seemed to be a little tired and out of spirits. Could it be that Stapleford had already demanded and obtained a definite reply? Brian scrutinized her anxiously, and she may have divined his thoughts, for she smiled and said—

"I have been upon the social treadmill for rather too many hours at a stretch, that is all. I wanted to have a long chat with you about things in general; but now I feel too stupid to talk to anybody. Happily, the end of all this monotonous revelry is not very far off; I don't think I could stand much more of it. Next week we go to Goodwood; then to Cowes, and then—oh, how glorious!—I shall be my own mistress once more, and Miss Joy will take me away to Homburg to recruit my jaded system."

"I am not going to Homburg, though," Brian could not help saying ruefully, "and I suppose I shall have no further opportunities of meeting you among the monotonous revellers of whom you have become so weary."

"Well, but that is just what I was thinking about," she rejoined, straightening herself in her chair and speaking with more animation. "Why shouldn't you come to Homburg? You can't stay in London all the summer; you won't care to go to Kingscliff; and if you haven't done with the labours of composition yet, why, pianos can be hired at Homburg as well as anywhere else, and there are certain spare hours in the middle of the day during which most people go to sleep, because they have nothing else to do. I would undertake to amuse you or find amusement for you in the mornings and evenings."

The suggestion was certainly a tempting one. Brian had not given a thought to the coming summer; but now he reflected that he was very well able to afford himself a holiday, and how could he spend it better than by betaking himself to a place where he might count upon seeing Beatrice every day? He fancied, too, that there was something more in her eagerness than a mere desire to be kind, or even to secure for herself a certain variety of companionship. It was no very far-fetched or extravagant conjecture that, at a time of crisis in her life, she might wish to have near her a friend upon whose sympathy or even advice she could rely. For, of course, there are situations in which simple honesty and devotion are of more value than the worldly wisdom of a multitude of counsellors.

"Would you really like me to come?" he asked, after a pause.

"Odd as it may appear," she answered, laughing, "I really should." Perhaps it was a somewhat tardy movement of compunction that made her add, "I al-

ways try to collect as large a circle as I can in places of that kind. Stapleford has promised to join us, and I dare say there will be others. I don't think you will find it dull."

He understood her meaning; but indeed the caution was not needed. If in the recesses of his heart there had still lurked the shadow of a lingering hope, this had been dispelled as much by her outspoken friendliness as by Miss Joy's assurance of the good opinion that she entertained of him. Well; he was thankful to have it so, since nothing more was attainable. His influence over her, if he possessed any, would at all events never be exerted save for what should seem to him to be her happiness, while his own would assuredly be increased by proximity to her. That, if it did nothing else for him, would relieve him from the torture of suspense and enable him to see for himself whither her destiny was leading her.

CHAPTER IX.

A LITTLE HOLIDAY.

It is not a pleasant thing to have the gout, nor is it a creditable thing to overeat yourself; but since, unfortunately, a very considerable number of persons both have the one and do the other, society at large ought to be thankful for the existence of Homburg. Dismal indeed would be the lot of those who should find themselves reduced to choose between Bath und Buxton as a *locus pœnitentiæ*. Now Homburg in the month of August is by no means a dismal place. The light air,

the bright sunshine, the early hours, the excellent bands which begin to tune up while the dew is still on the grass and sound their last note only at bedtime, the host of friends whom everybody is sure to fall in with in the neighbourhood of the Elisabethan spring—all these combine to render life at that gay little watering-place a cheerful, innocent, and invigorating sort of business for all such as the beneficent action of the waters does not cause to lie down upon the flat of their backs and howl aloud.

But, indeed, if Homburg had been as dull, as empty and as enervating as London at the same season, not the less would it have appeared of all spots upon the earth's surface the most desirable to Brian Segrave. Little did he, who knew not the meaning of the word gout, care about the curative properties of climate or *Brunnen*; little did it matter to him whether or not the broad alleys of the gardens and the terraces in front of the Cursaal were thronged daily by an assemblage of British peers, Members of Parliament, and other celebrities, with here and there an affable Royal Highness or Serenity amongst them: to him there was but one person in Homburg whose presence was of the very smallest importance; and a great joy it was to him to discover—as he did on the first occasion of his meeting with her—that this was not the Miss Huntley of Park Lane who was holding out her hand to him, but the Beatrice Huntley of Kingscliff whose frank good-fellowship had made him feel at ease and happy in her company before ever he had committed the folly of falling in love with her. The difference was perhaps more perceptible to him now than it had been in Lon-

don. Assuredly she had not shown any lack of friendship to him then; only he had had a sense of distance from her—social inferiority would be rather too strong an expression—which had not been the less real for being difficult of definition, and which, in some undefinable fashion, troubled him no longer in this clearer atmosphere.

In any case, she seemed bent upon dismissing Park Lane and all its associations from her memory for the time being, "I am out for a holiday and I want to enjoy it," was almost the first thing that she said. "Suppose we agree that during the next three weeks we will treat England as a mere geographical expression?"

"I am prepared to treat everything and everybody exactly as you think best," Brian replied.

She raised her eyebrows and smiled. "Really? Then I will tell you just what you shall do, so that there may be no mistake. Every morning at half-past seven, or a quarter to eight at latest, you will meet us at the Elisabethan Brunnen and trudge up and down, up and down with us, while we drink our prescribed number of glasses and the band plays, until you are ready to drop. Perhaps I shall introduce you to one or two fellow-sufferers, and if I do, you must treat them civilly. Some liberty ought to be allowed to you with regard to your treatment of yourself; so you needn't drink the waters if you don't think they would be good for you. Well, then you will go home to breakfast, and you can rest or compose operas or do what you like until the middle of the day, when you will meet us again at the Cursaal and join us in a nondescript sort of meal. In the afternoon we shall stroll down to the

lawn-tennis ground—by the way, I hope you have brought flannels and a racquet with you—and if it isn't too hot and there are some nice people there, we shall play. Otherwise, we shall look on and listen to the old fogeys talking scandal. I hate driving; but sometimes you will be taken out for a drive, as a small concession to Miss Joy, who adores it. Then will come dinner, and then the band again, and at about ten o'clock you will be sent off home to bed. You can write *D.C. ad lib.* at the end of that programme. How do you like the prospect?"

Well, he liked the prospect very much, and he liked the fulfilment of it still better. He too was out for a holiday; he too was resolved to banish melancholy thoughts and misgivings from his mind, if he could; and, as it turned out, he found this quite easy. When every hour of the day is filled up, when one has to rise the moment after waking, and when one goes to bed, pleasantly tired out, at night, little leisure remains for self-torment. That marching to and fro in the crisp air of the early morning was far from being the pain and grief to him that it is to persons of a less robust physique; the friends with whom Beatrice stopped, every now and again, to exchange a few words, and to some of whom she presented him, were people of agreeable, easy manners and of an outward appearance pleasing to the eye. They represented London society; but they seemed to Brian to represent it in an infinitely more attractive way there than at home; so true is it that the results of observation depend chiefly upon the observer. Moreover, the complete novelty of everything was in itself enough to satisfy a man who had never

been out of England before, while the amusements enumerated by Miss Huntley served as well as any others to bring about the one end that he desired, which was to be always near her.

But what was best of all was that Miss Joy, who was going through a systematic course of the waters, and who, as she pathetically declared, was losing weight every minute, could not possibly go through the amount of exercise which two young people in perfect health thought nothing of. Besides, she had to absent herself for a certain time every afternoon in order to take a bath. Hence it came about that there were occasional long talks among the more secluded paths of the woods—talks in which not a word was said about Stapleford or the future member for the Kingscliff division or any other of those persons and topics which had been tabooed by a tacit agreement, but in which generalities were discussed after a fashion which rendered the mention of names wholly superfluous. And in these conversations there were always two things by which Brian was impressed; firstly, his companion's indecision with regard to her future course (for it was evident that more than one plan was fermenting in her mind); and secondly, her submissive and even admiring way of listening to his own humble views of life and duty, which, to be sure, were of a fascinatingly simple character.

"You are like Mr. Monckton," she said once; "you only see two sides to everything, a right and a wrong one, and you have no more difficulty in telling which to choose than you would have in distinguishing between A and B. I suppose, if everybody resembled you,

the millennium might begin without further loss of time."

Sometimes, however, she was a little less complimentary, and seemed as if she were seeking to excuse herself. "After all," she would urge, "it isn't every point that can be reached by making straight for it as the crow flies. Supposing, for example, that you were the Prime Minister, and had to come to a definite conclusion of some kind about the Eastern question and the Irish question and all the other puzzles. You wouldn't find it help you very far on your way to be perfectly sound as to first principles. First of all, you would have to make up your mind what ought to be done, then you would have to discover how much of it came within the range of practical politics; after which, I suppose, you would have to set to work to cudgel or cajole others into taking the right direction. And do you imagine that you would ever get through that business without persuading yourself that the end justifies the means?"

If, as would occasionally happen, the discussion took too much of a personal turn, both parties to it were ready, and even anxious, to change the subject. One of them, at all events, was nervously alive to the danger of quitting the safe ground of abstract debate. He felt that the footing upon which he now stood with Beatrice could hardly be altered for the better, though it might easily enough be altered for the worse. Whether she divined his love for her or not he was quite uncertain; but, supposing that she did, that would surely not tell against him, seeing that he was so very careful to avoid hinting at its existence.

But, of course, this happy state of things, this ignoring of patent facts and resolution to live only in the present, could not last very long. It lasted, in fact, for the space of one week; at the end of which time the list of arrivals included that of "Lord Stapleford, *mit Familie und Begleitung*," at the Hotel Victoria. The last words were probably added for the sake of euphony, Stapleford, as we know, being as yet unprovided with a family, while his "Begleitung" was confined to a modest unit; but as regarded the principal figure, the announcement was but too accurate; and perhaps the only person who derived any pleasure from the perusal of it was Miss Joy.

That disinterested, but slightly obtuse lady, did not fail to express her satisfaction to Brian when, for the first time since their interview in London, she obtained speech of him in private. This was at the springs on the morning after Stapleford's arrival; and as Miss Joy ambled along the alley beside him, murmuring complacently that all would be well now, that it was high time to have done with hesitation, and so forth, Brian could see Stapleford's back and Beatrice's moving across the alternate bands of shadow and sunshine a few yards ahead. He tried not to be jealous; he tried not to feel as if he had been abruptly dismissed; he even tried to think that the very well-dressed, good-humoured, and conventional young man who had relieved him of his daily spell of escort duty was a fit and proper person to become Beatrice Huntley's husband; and he was about as successful in this last attempt as in the other two. Nevertheless, he was sufficiently master of himself to conceal his feelings; nor, indeed, was he sub-

jected in the sequel to any such trying ordeal as during that first hour had seemed to be in store for him. For it speedily became manifest that Beatrice did not wish to be left alone with her cousin. Stapleford's manœuvres, ably seconded by those of Miss Joy, proved totally unavailing to draw her away from the phalanx of friends with which she now chose to surround herself, and if at any time she had a fancy to leave the beaten track for ten minutes or so, it was invariably Brian who was requested to bear her company. However, her whole manner had once more undergone a complete change, so that there was little comfort to be got out of those brief and rare audiences.

"One should endeavour to avoid incongruity," she said one day, when, not without some prickings of conscience, he ventured to suggest that they might wander a little deeper into the woods. "Homburg really isn't the place for pastorals and idylls; make an effort, and bring yourself more into harmony with local colour. I have arranged that you and Stapleford are to play a lawn-tennis match this afternoon against two men who, he says, are very strong, and in the evening we are going to have quite a large dinner at the Cursaal—no less than eight of us."

"The programme is altered, then?" said Brian interrogatively.

"The programme is altered," she replied. "So are the circumstances."

That was indisputable; and although the alteration might not be entirely welcome, yet he had known all along that it must come in the end. Moreover, during the next week or ten days he could not help enjoying

himself, notwithstanding the dark clouds that obscured his horizon. Stapleford struck up a friendship with him; he became more or less intimate with the other young men who were at Homburg for reasons which apparently were in no way connected with ill-health; his leisure was fully occupied by games of lawn-tennis in the sunny afternoons, by cheery little dinners at the various hotels and restaurants, by strolls through the illuminated gardens after dark, to a musical accompaniment. The really happy portion of his holiday was over, but this epilogue was not devoid of charm. Only, as time went on, he became more and more sensible of an uneasy feeling about Beatrice, whose behaviour caused him some perplexity, and also some distress. He would have been glad if she had rejected Stapleford; he would not have been altogether sorry if she had seen her way to accept him (for, indeed, the young man deserved every word that Miss Joy had said in his favour); but it seemed rather unfair, and even unworthy, to encourage him and hold him off at one and the same time; and this was evidently what Beatrice wanted to do.

Now, Stapleford, who had the patience of Job and a supply of good-nature so inexhaustible that he himself might have been cited as offering a personification of that quality, was not a born fool, and consequently allowed it to be seen, in the long run, that he did not intend to be trifled with for ever. "I understand the fun of playing a fish; but really I can't see any sport in keeping him on the hook after a baby in arms might land him," he said once to Miss Joy, who duly reported this remark in the proper quarter.

The effect of it was to bring down upon him such

a shower of snubs and cutting little speeches as must have driven him, if he had had a spark of spirit left, to show that a fish, so long as he remains in the water, is a free fish still; and since he responded but feebly to the stimulus, Miss Huntley took another way with him, and tried to scare him off by drawing perpetual comparisons between him and Brian Segrave, as well as by conspicuously increasing her marks of favour towards the latter. Thus she obtained, it is true, the respite which she probably desired; but it was at the expense of offending both her lovers; for Brian was surprised and hurt at being made use of as a stalking-horse.

So this odd and rather absurd contest went on until a trivial incident brought it to a climax. One evening they were all returning by train, after dining and witnessing a display of fireworks in the Thiergarten at Frankfort. The excursion had not been a pleasant one for Stapleford, who throughout it had been trying ineffectually, and somewhat too persistently, to lead his cousin away from the others; it had not been pleasant for Brian, through whose unwilling instrumentality his efforts had been baffled; and when they reached the Homburg station Beatrice, with an undisguised yawn, declared that it had not been pleasant for her either.

"The three F's," she remarked, as she rose to leave the railway carriage; "Frankfort, Fireworks, and Fatigue—and a little one thrown in for fiasco. This experience shall not be repeated."

"Why stop there?" asked Stapleford; for his endurance had been subjected to a prolonged strain; "why not add Fools?"

"I don't see any occasion to use the plural number," she rejoined.

She had her back turned towards him, and was in the act of descending from the carriage, so that there was no great harm in his relieving his feelings by a smothered ejaculation and a stamp; but certainly it was unlucky for him that he chose the tail of her gown to stamp upon. If Brian, who had already got out, had not extended his long arms and caught her, she must infallibly have fallen headlong upon the platform. She turned round with that look of deadly ire which will come over the features of the best of women under such provocation.

"Another F," she observed calmly; "a big one this time, since it stands for your foot."

"I'm awfully sorry," said Stapleford; "I seem to be destined to put my foot in it to-day."

"You do," she agreed, with marked emphasis; "and it seems to be Mr. Segrave's destiny to protect me from the consequences. But for him, I should probably be now lying on a stretcher, with my nose and all my front teeth broken."

Now, a little exasperation might very well have been pardoned, under the circumstances, nor was this rebuke at all more severe than many others which Stapleford had laughed off; but perhaps it came upon him as the last straw. Anyhow, he looked very gloomy and savage over it; and after the ladies had been put into their carriage and driven away, Brian really thought for a moment that the young man who stood frowning at him in the glare of the gas-lamps meant to have his blood.

However, there was no sound of anger in Stapleford's voice when he said presently, "It's early yet; I think I'll walk round to your place and have a smoke with you before I turn in, Segrave, if you don't mind."

And as they strolled towards the Kisseleff Strasse, where Brian had engaged rooms, he discoursed with all his accustomed amiability, cracking small jokes and seeming to have quite recovered from a passing irritation; so that, after he had been made comfortable with an armchair and a cigar, it was a little startling to hear him begin:

"I say, old chap, we may as well understand one another. Are we rivals or are we not? Because I'll be hanged if I can make out. Of course you know what I'm here for; but I dare say you don't know that I'm about as crazily in love with Beatrice Huntley as a man can be. I tell you that because I think it may make a difference. If you're in love with her yourself, I've no more to say; but if you're not, you might give a fellow a helping hand, now you know that he's in earnest."

Brian hesitated; it was more difficult for him than it was for Stapleford to lay bare the innermost secrets of his heart. Still, thinking himself bound to be honest, he replied, with something of a blush, "Well, then, since you ask me, I do love her; these things are not matters of choice, you know. But I hope you don't think that I have been trying to—to interfere with you in any way."

"Oh, that's all right," said Stapleford; "I only wanted to know. You are just as much entitled to be

in love with her as I am, and we won't quarrel over it. Let the best man win."

"But, my dear fellow," protested Brian, "you surely don't imagine that I shall ask Miss Huntley to be my wife, do you? You forget who I am—a mere nobody, without an acre of land and with only a few hundreds a year of my own."

"I don't see what better reason you could find for marrying an heiress—especially since you happen to be in love with her. In fact, that's precisely my own case."

"Not quite, I think," said Brian.

"Well, it's near enough. What I fancied was that you suspected me of being after her money; and small blame to you! It began in that way, I confess. Her people and my people got the thing up, and I had no objection. But after I came to know her, why, I changed my point of view altogether; and now I'd marry her if she hadn't a sixpence. I would indeed; though I suppose it would be a perfectly idiotic thing to do. So now I think I may claim to be as little of a fortune-hunter as you are, and if I come in first I shall win on my merits, don't you see?"

Brian nodded. "But there's no race," he said.

"That remains to be seen. I doubt whether she is in love with you, if you'll excuse my saying so. Old Joy swears she isn't, but thinks she has no end of a high opinion of you. As for me, I'm about sick of this fast and loose game. Now, look here, Segrave, would you mind not coming down to the springs to-morrow morning? It can't make much odds to you, and if you're out of the way, I shall have some chance of getting her to say plainly what she means."

Brian readily gave the promise requested, and added, with some magnanimity, "I wish you good luck, Stapleford, and if Miss Huntley marries you, she will marry a real good fellow, I'm sure of that. You won't expect me to say that I quite enjoy the idea of her marrying anybody."

So the two young men shook hands and parted. It may be (for human nature is human nature, after all) that their mutual good-will would have been a trifle less genuine if each of them had not been secretly persuaded that the other's prospect of success was small.

CHAPTER X.

STAPLEFORD IS FOUND IMPOSSIBLE.

By mere force of habit, Brian rose at an early hour the next morning and had nearly finished dressing before he remembered that he was a self-constituted prisoner. He did not repent of the concession that he had made—which, to be sure, was no very important one—but when he recollected that he had actually gone so far as to wish Stapleford success, he could not help smiling; because, although he had believed himself to be speaking sincerely at the time, he was now quite sure that he wished for no such thing. How could he possibly wish Beatrice to marry a man whom she did not love?

He strolled out on to his balcony, which was overgrown with masses of bright-coloured petunias, and looked down the sunny street towards the Untere Promenade. In the distance he could hear the band

opening the proceedings with *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*; a light, bluish mist hung over the gardens and softened the rounded outlines of the trees, giving promise of a hot day; from every direction matutinal water-drinkers were hurrying towards their meeting-place at the Elisabethan spring. There they all went: the Hereditary Grand-Duke of Langenschwalbach with his long-legged equerry; old Lady Chatterton, looking to right and left with inquisitive twitchings of the nose, as though she already scented scandal in that pure air; fat Miss Kingfisher, pounding along post-haste to catch up His Serene Highness; and the Judges and the Generals and the debilitated young men and the young men who had nothing the matter with them. Then his heart gave a little jump; for Beatrice herself, walking with her head in the air, as usual, came within the field of his vision and passed on, Miss Joy trotting in her wake. Had she any suspicion of what was in store for her? Brian could imagine it all. Stapleford would march up with a determined air; Miss Joy, taking in the situation at a glance, would retire precipitately; and then—well, then there would probably be very little preliminary beating about the bush. A man who does not mind sacrificing his own life can assassinate the Czar of all the Russias, and a man who is willing to take his chance of rejection cannot be prevented from proposing to any lady with whom he is alone for five minutes, be she never so reluctant to be proposed to.

And supposing that Beatrice should reject this long-suffering suitor, as Brian believed that she would, when it came to the push—might it not, after all, be

just possible that at some future time, when perhaps he might have made a name for himself— But he was determined not to revert to dreams which he had dismissed long ago as idle. Stapleford had been pleased to speak as if they stood upon the same footing; but the facts remained that an impecunious peer differs in many essential points from an impecunious composer of music. “Moreover,” concluded Brian, “she doesn’t care a straw for either of us.” So he went back into the room and played scales resolutely until his coffee was brought to him, together with a few letters, one of which, as he saw with pleasure, was addressed in Monckton’s handwriting.

Monckton was away on his annual holiday, and wrote from Milford Haven, whither he had successfully navigated the ten-ton yawl in which he was wont to sail the seas when driven to seek a little relaxation. He had carried away his topmast, had run short of provisions, had not taken off his clothes for three days and nights, and had altogether been having a most enjoyable and invigorating time of it. “I only wish you were on board,” he wrote. “The sea-breezes would do you a great deal more good than you are likely to get out of the waters of Homburg or its society either. I haven’t heard much from Kingscliff, except the announcement of your brother’s engagement to Miss Greenwood, which, of course, will be no news to you.” Then followed a hearty panegyric on Kitty, and an expression of opinion on the writer’s part that any man who married her might consider himself uncommonly lucky.

In the latter sentiment Brian warmly concurred.

Gilbert might have written to him, he thought; but then he remembered that he had not written to Gilbert and resolved to repair that omission forthwith. This engagement was, to his mind, an entirely satisfactory thing. It showed that Gilbert had a spark of romance in him; it showed that he was capable of constancy; it even furnished something of an excuse for that sale of land to which Brian had never been able to reconcile himself; for when a man wants to marry and can't afford to do so, he should not be too hardly judged if he disposes of what, after all, is his own. In his anxiety to whitewash his brother, Brian had very nearly gone the length of acquiescing in Beatrice's favourite thesis that right and wrong admit of no exact definition, when his thoughts were diverted into quite another channel by the abrupt entrance of Stapleford, whose features and gait bore the unmistakable impress of defeat.

"I just looked in to bid you good-bye," said he; "I'm off to England by the next train."

"You haven't prospered, then?" asked Brian, with a not very successful effort to look sympathetic.

"Prospered?—rather not! Well, I'm out of it now, and you can go in and try your luck if you choose; but upon my word, I doubt whether you'll do any better."

Brian did not think it worth while to renew his protestations of the previous evening; but after a time he inquired: "Did she give you any reason for refusing you?"

"She began by saying that she might very likely have accepted me if I hadn't been in such a hurry;

and when I pointed out to her that I had waited about as long as anybody could be expected to wait she changed her ground and declared that my having fallen in love with her made all the difference, because she couldn't consent to a one-sided bargain. Then I suppose she saw that I was a little cut up about it, you know, and she spoke very kindly and seemed to be really sorry for me. Indeed, from the way that she went on about not being good enough for me and all that, I almost hoped that I should be able to bring her round. However, she very soon let me see that the thing wasn't to be done. She is an odd sort of girl," concluded Stapleford thoughtfully.

And when Brian, with some warmth, declared that she had no equal, if that made her odd, he did not at once assent. It was plain that he had been hard hit, and also that he was smarting a little from the consciousness of having been made a fool of, though he was too much of a gentleman to say so.

Nor, after he had gone away, was Brian able to pronounce quite so favourable a verdict as he could have wished upon the conduct of the lady who had no equal. True it was that there were no grounds for accusing her of having flirted with Stapleford merely to amuse herself. Whatever she might be, she was not a flirt; and besides, it had been abundantly evident of late that Stapleford's attentions were disagreeable to her. Still it was not less true that she might easily have got rid of him at an earlier stage of the proceedings, that it had been quite unnecessary to bring him all the way to Homburg to send him about his business, and that her only reason for so doing must have

been that she had not taken the trouble to find out her own mind. That seemed to show a certain want of consideration for the feelings of others. But the heat and light of the sun (which the Germans, with a linguistic perversity which might have been expected of them, have made feminine), are not perceptibly diminished by the spots which can be discerned upon its surface, and there are many lives which circle round a female luminary. Brian's, apparently, was destined to be one of these; nor could he feel that the discovery of a trifling flaw here and there in any way lessened the attraction to which he had surrendered himself. Assuredly it was not likely to prevent him from taking the earliest possible opportunity of indemnifying himself for the loss of his accustomed morning walk with Miss Huntley.

Knowing her habits as he did, he set forth at three o'clock for the lawn-tennis ground, in the confident expectation of meeting her; and there, sure enough, she was, sitting under the trees, the centre of a group of spectators, to whom she was chatting as unconcernedly as if there had been no luckless young man at that moment speeding towards Cologne, with the fragments of a broken heart beneath his waistcoat. Brian stood watching her for a short time. She did not see him, nor did he care to force his way through the circle, which was sure to break up presently. But Miss Joy, who occupied a chair some yards in the background, beckoned to him as soon as she became aware of his vicinity.

"Have you heard?" she whispered, lowering her sunshade, and turning a distressed countenance towards him.

He seated himself on the dry grass beside her. "Yes," he replied, "I've heard, but I'm afraid I can't look upon it in the light of a calamity as you do."

"Well," returned Miss Joy, with a touch of irritability, "I suppose it wouldn't make much difference if you could. As for me, I am disappointed and disgusted, and it is a relief to me to think that I am just about to take my last bath. The sooner we leave Hom-burg now the better I shall be pleased."

"Are you leaving at once, then?" asked Brian in dismay; for he had not calculated upon so precipitate a departure.

"I fancy we shall start in a day or two. I have finished my cure, and Beatrice was saying this afternoon that she had had enough of the place."

"Where shall you go?"

"To Switzerland, I believe; and then, no doubt, to Kingscliff for the autumn. You know, perhaps, that Beatrice has been having the Manor House put in order, and furnished."

Miss Joy paused and sighed. "Is there any likelihood of our meeting you there?" she asked by-and-by.

Brian shook his head. "Oh, no; I shall be busy in London. Besides, there would be nothing to take me to Kingscliff, unless, indeed, I should go down for my brother's wedding."

"What!" exclaimed Miss Joy, in accents of such amazement that Brian burst out laughing.

"I should have thought," said he, "that, after spending so many months in our part of the world, you would have been prepared to hear of Gilbert's engagement to Kitty Greenwood."

Prepared or unprepared, Miss Joy received this intelligence with a demonstration as surprising as it was inexplicable. She flung her sunshade up into the air, caught it by the handle as it fell and ejaculated, "Hooray!" Then, perceiving that her neighbour was staring at her as if he suspected her of having suddenly gone raving mad, "Excuse this exuberance of animal spirits," she said; "but I never did like your brother, Mr. Segrave, and that's the truth."

"I may be very dense," observed Brian; "but I confess, I don't see why your disliking my brother should make you rejoice in his happiness."

"It is our duty to love our enemies," returned Miss Joy sententiously.

"Oh, Miss Joy, that really won't do!"

"That won't do? Then you may take it that mine is the glee of a sour old maid who naturally exults when she sees a fellow-creature blunder into the snare of matrimony. And if that doesn't satisfy you, let me mention that I have the greatest esteem and regard for Miss Greenwood: I suppose I may be allowed to rejoice in her happiness, may I not?"

"Yes, but I think you must have had other reasons than those for behaving so indecorously in public."

"Very well, then; I had other reasons. Only I am not going to communicate them to you; so you needn't bother me. It is time for me to take my bath now. When you write to your brother, please give him my hearty congratulations."

With that, she marched off, leaving Brian completely mystified, and resolved to find out from Beatrice what might be the meaning of these enigmatic utterances.

But, of course, when Beatrice separated herself from her friends and joined him, it was neither about the news of his brother's engagement nor about Miss Joy's singular manner of receiving it that he was chiefly desirous of talking to her.

"If you are not going to play lawn-tennis," she said, "let us find some cooler and more sequestered spot than this. I have a crow to pluck with you."

However, she did not seem to be very seriously angry: on the contrary, there was a lurking smile about her eyes and lips which reminded him of what she had been during that happy week which had preceded Stapleford's advent upon the scene. Moreover, she made straight for a certain retired bench, shut in by trees and shrubs, where she and he had sometimes sat in those days, but which they had not since revisited.

"You did not put in an appearance at the springs this morning," she began; "was that accidental or intentional? But I won't tempt you to prevaricate. I happen to have been informed, upon the very best authority, that your absence was due to a preconcerted arrangement; and pray, do you consider that friendly behaviour?"

"I thought it was friendly to him," answered Brian, without embarrassment (for he was sure that Stapleford had betrayed nothing more than the fact mentioned); "and I certainly didn't think it was unfriendly to you. Why should it be?"

"As if you didn't know I have been using you as a shield and buckler for the last fortnight! But perhaps you don't like being used as a shield and buckler. Anyhow, I can forgive you; for you have done both

Stapleford and me a service, whether you intended it or not. Oh, what a comfort it is to be able to write *Finis* to that chapter!"

"Couldn't you have done that before you left London?" Brian ventured to suggest.

"No doubt I could; and I see by your face that you think I ought to have done it. You are a man; so you don't understand indecision in such cases. You would, if you were a woman, and especially if you were a rich woman. Joseph, whose remarks are often much to the point, said to me before we parted, 'I could lay my hand on as many as twenty men of good position and character who would be very pleased to have the spending of your money; but I doubt whether you would find one of them wear as well as Lord Stapleford.'"

"Stapleford wanted something more than the spending of your money," Brian felt bound in justice to say.

"Exactly so; and that was just what made him impossible. Why do you look at me in that dissatisfied way? Were you so very anxious that I should become Lady Stapleford?"

"No," answered Brian; "I never wished that, and I'm glad that it isn't to be. All the same, I am very sorry for him."

"So am I. I expressed my sorrow to him and abased myself before him when he looked piteous at me. Nevertheless, he has had a lucky escape, and he isn't badly hurt. Men who are devoted to athletics and sports get over these little misadventures with wonderful rapidity. He is going to shoot grouse now; and if that doesn't cure him, as perhaps it won't, the stalking

will. I made a point of ascertaining that he would get some stalking later on."

And nothing would persuade her to take a more serious view than this of poor Stapleford's disappointment. "You will see—you will see," she said. "We are in August now: well, before Christmas he will be thanking me for having let him off. If you must needs pity somebody, pity Clementina, who will not be so quickly consoled. You might even spare a little pity for me; for I can assure you that there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when she and I meet. The mere thought of it makes me long to remain abroad until the winter and then fly to Egypt."

"I hope you won't do that," said Brian.

"Oh, I can't. I have urgent affairs to attend to at home: not to speak of the first representation of your opera, which I wouldn't miss for anything. You must write and tell me when the date is fixed. I shall have taken up my abode at the Manor House by that time, and I shall bring your brother and a large Kingscliff contingent to London with me to pelt you with laurels."

"By the way," said Brian, "my brother is going to be married to Kitty Greenwood. I only heard of it this morning."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Beatrice incredulously. And then: "You don't mean that it is actually settled and announced?"

And on being informed that such was the case, she turned her head away and drummed impatiently on the ground with her foot.

A horrid suspicion flashed suddenly across Brian's mind. He remembered Miss Joy's unaccountable exul-

tation; he remembered that Gilbert had certainly been very assiduous in his attentions to Miss Huntley at Lady Clementina's dinner-party: and Gilbert was handsome, clever, likely enough to distinguish himself—just the sort of man who would probably arouse her interest. But the next instant he was certain that this suspicion was groundless, although there would be nothing surprising in Miss Joy's entertaining it. Everybody must admit that there are things which we know to be facts, without being able to prove them such either to others or ourselves.

"You don't seem pleased," he hazarded at length.

"I am not pleased," she answered. "I was in hopes that the girl would have had the sense to marry Captain Mitchell, who would make her as happy as the day is long. As for your brother he cares for nothing in heaven or on earth but himself."

"I think he must care a little for Kitty," Brian urged.

"Oh yes; a little—that's the unfortunate part of it. I wish you hadn't told me this! I should have liked to have only pleasant memories of our last day."

"Your last day," echoed Brian dismally.

"Yes; our time is up, and I have decided to issue marching orders for to-morrow. Now, if you please, I want to forget your brother and Stapleford, and Clementina, and everybody else whom it is painful to think of. Tell me about your opera."

But in truth this subject had been somewhat threshed out, and neither Brian's efforts, nor Miss Huntley's, could prevent the day from ending in a dreary and unsatisfactory fashion. To him, at any

rate, the shadow of the coming parting was ever present—a parting which, as he felt, must add the melancholy word *Finis* to another chapter than that of which she had so lightly spoken.

CHAPTER XI.

HALF-REGRETS.

So large a number of well-meaning but officious persons thought fit to assemble at the railway-station to bid Miss Huntley good-bye, that Brian obtained no more than a shake of the hand from her, and indeed was indebted to his physical advantages of stature and muscle for even that small boon. He returned to his rooms, through a town which had all at once become utterly commonplace and uninteresting, and began to pack up forthwith. The curtain had fallen; the scene was vacant; duty as well as inclination beckoned him away; for that morning's post had brought him an opportune reminder from Phipps that his time was not his own.

Two days afterwards he was once more at his old quarters in Duke Street, and on the following evening his collaborator, who had taken a small house on the river for the summer months, in order to be within easy reach, dined with him at their deserted club and laid before him the final arrangement which had been entered into with the manager of the Ambiguity Theatre. That enterprising person had decided to introduce *The King's Veto* in the beginning of November, being of opinion that failure would be less costly and disastrous

then than at a later date. However, the manager did not anticipate failure, while Phipps professed himself assured of success.

"Only, you know, Segrave," said he, "you mustn't mind a few excisions and alterations. I don't pretend to judge of your work from the musical critic's standpoint, but I think I know pretty well what will fetch the play-going public, and it is the play-going public that we have to please, no matter at what sacrifice."

"You have only to give your orders," answered Brian. "I won't promise never to argue, but I'll promise to yield if I can't talk you over."

And he kept to his word, notwithstanding that, after the piece had been put in rehearsal, the sacrifices demanded of him proved to be rather greater, and the excisions more numerous than he had bargained for. In every field of art a man must sooner or later find himself face to face with the question of whether he will pursue his vocation for its own sake or for the sake of profit. Both motives are legitimate, but they are very seldom compatible with one another; and although a compromise may be, and generally is, arrived at, self-respect is apt to have a little of the bloom rubbed off it in the process. Brian, who at one time might have felt that his first duty, after all, was to keep life in himself, and that beggars must not be choosers, had no longer that incentive to pander to popular bad taste, and in spite of his anxiety to achieve success, there were moments when he thought that success, if it should come, would be hardly worth the price asked for it.

Fortunately, his modesty and good temper not only

kept him on excellent terms with Phipps and the manager, but induced them to stretch a point here and there to give him pleasure; and if the perpetual consultations and discussions in which he was required to take part did nothing else for him, they at least served to fill up his time and a large measure of his thoughts. Of Beatrice he heard nothing; but then he had not expected to hear of her; nor had he been again disquieted by that fugitive surmise with reference to her and his brother, although in the brief acknowledgment of his congratulations which he had received from the latter, there had occurred a somewhat ambiguous phrase:—

“With your romantic notions you will probably consider me a wise man, not a fool; but I confess that I am sometimes amazed at myself. I have always, as you know, been a common-sense, common-place person, with a proper appreciation of the main chance, and if I had allowed a great chance to escape me for the sake of love (as I may have done, for who knows what is in the lucky-bag until he has dipped his hand into it?), shouldn't I be bound, in mere consistency, to accuse myself of almost criminal folly?”

People whom the force of circumstances has deprived of a confidant will sometimes relieve themselves by making half-confidences to those whom they believe to be too dense to understand them, and it may have been in obedience to some such impulse that Gilbert had penned the above incautious words. For nothing could be more certain than that, after a week or two of unthinking bliss, he would begin to formulate against himself the accusation specified; and even if his own

judgment had not condemned him, was not Mr. Buswell ready and determined to act the part of a candid friend? That pillar of the Liberal cause was not long absent from Kingscliff, nor, after his return, did he lose much time in paying Gilbert a friendly visit.

"So you're going to be married, I hear," he began. "Well, Mr. Segrave, you disappoint me, you do indeed. Not that I've a word to say against your young lady, far from it! But she ain't the right one, you see."

"Perhaps," said Gilbert mildly, "I may be excused for thinking myself the best judge of that."

"Quite natural you should think so," assented Mr. Buswell generously; "though not what I should have looked for from a man of your intelligence. I gave you fair warning too, as you may remember. Don't you make any mistake about it, sir; you ought to have married the Manor 'Ouse, or in other words, Miss 'Untley."

And it was altogether useless to take up a lofty tone with this too familiar personage and point out to him that the usages of society forbid such free mention of ladies' names.

"You and me ain't society," he returned, not a whit abashed, "and what passes betwixt you and me don't go no further. I'm determined to have the Manor 'Ouse, and I make no doubt but what I *shall* have it; for if you don't marry the young lady, there's plenty of others for her to choose from, and we may expect to see the property put up for sale again before very long. On'y as I told you before, if Kingscliff don't get the land through you, why, there's a fairish number of

Kingscliff voters who may think you ain't the man to represent 'em."

Threats or warnings of this kind, repeated day after day in varying language, made Gilbert long to throw off the Buswell yoke and fight his own battle; but that, as he very well knew, would be tantamount to abandoning the contest. Buswell, who continued to work for him with apparent assiduity, and who was all-powerful with the Radical portion of the constituency, could, and doubtless would, start a third candidate if defied; and it was easy to foresee who, in that event, would be compelled, by loyalty to his party, to retire.

Thus it came to pass that the brow of Miss Kitty's lover was often clouded by care, and that he sometimes distressed her by the total irrelevance of his replies.

"I do hope, dear," she said one day, with a profound sigh, "that when you are a member you will never, never vote for such an abominable thing as triennial parliaments! What would life be worth to us if it were one long general election?"

"It is indeed an appalling picture," answered Gilbert, "but I dare say we should get accustomed to it, and pull through somehow. I think any kind of life would be worth a good deal to me so long as I had you beside me, Kitty."

He said these pretty things to her every now and then, and meant them too. He was still as much in love with her as he had ever been, and he realised besides that she was his best friend—possibly his only friend. If her love and companionship did not suffice to console him for all imaginable losses and disappointments, it must be acknowledged that therein he did

not greatly differ from the majority of mankind; his misfortune was that he was perfectly conscious of a fact which most of us manage to keep out of sight.

No date had as yet been fixed for the wedding. It was to take place "after the election," but how soon or how long after remained an open question. Admiral and Mrs. Greenwood were not in a hurry, nor was Kitty; and for the time being they were, one and all, too much impressed with the paramount necessity of getting their candidate returned to have leisure for the consideration of other projects.

That their utmost efforts would be required was becoming more and more manifest as the autumn approached. It was all very well for Mr. Buswell to boast, "I 'old this division in the 'oller of my 'and;" but when his audacious words were reported in the Conservative camp, Sir John Pollington shook with silent, comfortable laughter, instead of becoming scarlet in the face and using bad language, as he would have done earlier in the year. For Giles, Q.C., was now hard at work and was proving himself able, energetic, and apt in the acquisition of popularity. All the hot summer through he was holding meetings here, there, and everywhere, making acquaintance with his constituents from the highest to the lowest, and delighting them with an inexhaustible supply of jokes and anecdotes. To the staid country gentlemen and their families, and to the well-to-do inhabitants of the Kings-cliff villas, his oratory came as a spring of fresh water in the desert. He was, perhaps, rather vulgar (and this exercised villadom a good deal), but then he was so very amusing; and what reward can be too great for

a man who is capable of extracting amusement from modern English politics? Even those who said they really must vote against him could not help liking him; and as for Admiral Greenwood, it would have been nothing short of cruelty to restrain him from asking this jolly opponent to dinner. So Mrs. Greenwood gave her consent, and the invitation was accepted, and Mr. Giles made himself so pleasant to everybody that all sting of personal animosity was removed from the struggle at once and for ever. This was creditable to both sides, and was generally declared to be so; but somehow or other Giles got all the glory of it. In the humbler ranks of society, too—and especially among the tradespeople—he earned many friends for himself. Business is business, and some of the latter shrewdly remarked that Mr. Segrave would continue to reside among them and consume the necessaries of life whether he were elected or not; whereas a stranger, who spent his money freely, and who made no secret of his intention to purchase a villa in the town, in the event of his return, would be a distinct acquisition.

All these things rendered it imperative upon earnest Liberals to bestir themselves; nor had Gilbert any reason to complain of lukewarmness on the part of his friends. In certain quarters of the borough Miss Kitty's influence was very strong, and many were the promises of support which her pleading drew from those who, on previous occasions, had not troubled themselves to go to the poll. The Admiral, too, did good service by beating up the outlying districts, and proclaiming aloud what great things the party of progress meant to do for the downtrodden tillers of the soil. He was, moreover,

nobly seconded by a person from whom, at the most, nothing beyond a benevolent neutrality could have been expected. In truth, it was no love for Gilbert Segrave (whom he disliked and distrusted) that led Captain Mitchell to espouse the cause which Miss Greenwood had so much at heart; but to her he could not help being loyal through thick and thin, and to please her he would have undertaken tasks more repulsive than that into which he now threw himself with characteristic energy. Gilbert found that it would not do to sneer at the exertions of this unsolicited partizan. The only approach to a difference that he ever had with Kitty, was when, with flushed cheeks and a quiver in her voice, she begged him to keep disparaging remarks about Captain Mitchell for other ears than hers.

"He never breathes a word against *you*," she said, "although——"

"Although he might justly lay so many sins to my charge?" suggested Gilbert smiling.

"No, not justly; but it must be more difficult for him to be generous than for you. And he is very, very generous!" cried Kitty, with tears in her eyes.

Well, if Mitchell abstained from bringing accusations against the young squire of Beckton, there were others who were less considerate; and, indeed, one of the terrors of canvassing is that the canvassed will not always understand the difference between public and private qualifications. Thus Mr. Puttick, when waited upon and requested in the most urbane manner to state his political views, replied bluntly that he didn't see a ha'porth to choose between Tories and Rads. If either side had proposed to abolish the duty on spirits,

that would have been something like; but he had been informed that no such measure was in contemplation, and consequently he "hadn't no politics to speak of," beyond the general sentiment of Rule Britannia, which gave him a slightly Conservative bias.

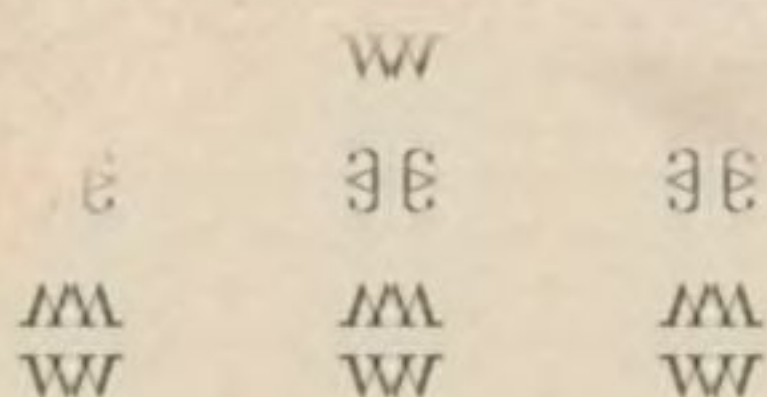
"But what I want cleared up, sir, is this," said he, fixing his eyes upon Gilbert's. "It has been put about as you done Mr. Brian out of his rights; and parson, when I ask him the question fair and square, he don't give me no answer. Now Dan'l Puttick ain't the man to promise his vote to a thief, if you'll excuse the liberty of me sayin' so."

It was not everybody who spoke with such shocking directness; but of hints and insinuations there was no lack; and the worst of it was that many of these were uttered in Kitty's presence. Gilbert bitterly attributed their origin to Monckton, but Monckton was another person of whom it was hardly safe to speak ill to his betrothed, so he had to smother his wrath and derive such comfort as he could from her indignant repudiation of the calumnies reported by Mr. Puttick and others.

It was something to know that neither whisperings nor backbitings could avail to shake her faith in him for an instant; it was something to know that, come weal, come woe, she would always remain faithful to him. But he, for his part, did not want woe to come, and at times he was sadly doubtful whether he would always remain faithful to her. If only she had had Miss Huntley's fortune, or even the half of it! Every day, as he left his own domain, he had to pass the Manor House, and the sight of the transformation that

was being wrought in that long-disused dwelling, of the masons hurrying to and fro, the gardeners planting, transplanting, and levelling, the furniture-vans unloading at the door, became a grievance to him. The place really ought to have been his; it ought never to have been separated from the Beckton property; perhaps he forgot that it had never been intended to be so separated. And after all, and in spite of all, it might have been his. That was the thought which would keep recurring to his mind and vexing him with its importunity. He might—he was almost sure of it—have gained possession not only of the Manor House, but of all the wealth of which but a trifling portion was now being lavished upon its improvement; and wealth to an ambitious man means so much more than mere luxury! He had, it is true, the grace to be ashamed of these half-regrets; he tried to shake them off, and never went the length of asking himself whether it might not be yet time to repair his error—supposing that he had committed an error. Still he looked forward to Miss Huntley's return with no slight interest and curiosity, wondering how she would receive him, and what effect the news of his engagement to Kitty Greenwood would have had upon her, and whether she would or would not exert herself on his behalf in the coming election fray.

In process of time the builder's men departed, the traces of their labour were removed, the stream of furniture-vans ceased, and the gravel drive was carefully swept. At last, when Gilbert was riding homewards one fine autumn afternoon, admiring the yellow and russet tints of the woods with that increased ap-



preciation which arises from the sense of ownership, a smart victoria dashed past him, and he was aware of two ladies, one of whom turned her head to nod to him in a very friendly fashion, while the other allowed him to see no more of her person than a very broad back.

Miss Joy's back and any expression that she might contrive to throw into it possessed as little interest for Gilbert as her face would have done; but that glimpse of Miss Huntley's stimulated his desire for an interview with her: and, indeed, neighbourly courtesy seemed to demand that he should lose no time about leaving a card at the Manor House. To the Manor House he accordingly betook himself on the following day; but even if he had wished to stop short at the formal ceremony of leaving his card at the door, he could hardly have done so after being informed that Miss Huntley was at home and had given particular orders for his admission. He was not sure that he quite liked this implied conviction on her part that he would call at the earliest possible moment, and, being more or less conversant with the ways of women, he at once suspected her of a design to draw him away from his allegiance. That she must resent his abrupt desertion of her he did not doubt for an instant; women, he thought, always do resent such behaviour, whether the deserter be personally indifferent to them or not. Thus, with his nerves ready braced up for action and all his wits on the alert, he followed the butler across a thickly-carpeted hall, which the resources of modern upholstery had adorned out of all resemblance to its former self, and was shown into what he remembered to have been in old days a small library.

Here, too, the upholsterers and decorators had been at work, and certainly no lady could wish for a more charming snugger than that in which Miss Huntley was now seated, writing letters. Gilbert took in all the details of the picture at a glance—the subdued colouring, the artistic furniture, the Japanese bronzes, and old china, and what-not—and smothered a sigh, for the refinements which money can buy always appealed forcibly to him. A wood fire was crackling cheerfully upon the high, brass-mounted dogs; but the windows, which looked out over the bay, had been thrown open, letting in the crisp autumnal air and a flood of yellow sunlight.

Beatrice rose and held out her hand with a frank smile which ought to have sufficed to disarm suspicion. "This is very pretty of you," she said. "I wanted you to be the first to welcome me, because I am painfully aware that I and my belongings are brand-new, while everything around us is as old as the hills. Your countenance gives us a sort of sanction; and we shall try to mellow as quickly as we can."

"I don't think either you or your belongings stand in need of any sanction," answered Gilbert politely.

"We are grateful for it, all the same. Now find a comfortable chair for yourself, and tell me what Kings-cliff has been saying and doing all this long time."

CHAPTER XII.

MISS HUNTLEY'S TACTICS.

SAD it is to think of neglected opportunities, and sad to look upon what might have been ours, but for

our folly or perversity; but the contemplation of great gain relinquished from honourable and disinterested motives is both soothing and inspiring. Gilbert, sitting in a luxurious arm-chair, with his back to the light and his eyes upon the beautiful and wealthy lady who had placed herself opposite to him, felt that he occupied a strong moral position, and that in any encounter which might be imminent it would be needless for him to employ strategy. So, in answer to her question he said:—

“Kingscliff is, and has been, busy electioneering. That sums up its public annals. In the way of personal items, I don't know that I have any to offer you, except what you have, perhaps, heard already, that I am going to be married.” And then he looked at her to see whether she would wince.

Of course, she did no such thing; she laughed a little, and answered: “Oh, I heard of your engagement ages ago, and I ought to have begun by congratulating you; but I feel as if all that had been gone through. It was such a very foregone conclusion, wasn't it?”

“I didn't know it was,” said Gilbert, not best pleased. “Is it also a foregone conclusion that I am to be congratulated?”

“Naturally. It would require a stronger mind than mine to offer anything except congratulations to persons about to marry.”

“I am sure you would always use the proper formula; but are your congratulations sincere in my particular case?” persisted Gilbert, not choosing to be put off in that way.

“You must be very conceited if you doubt it. Kitty

Greenwood is the prettiest girl in the county, and as good as she is pretty. Really, with the highest possible respect for you, I don't see what better fortune you are entitled to by your merits."

"I don't consider myself entitled to any good fortune at all," Gilbert declared; "only I am not a rich man, and many people would say that I should have acted more prudently by marrying a woman with a little money of her own, that's all. I thought you might possibly take that view."

"Oh, if you talk about prudence that is another matter. One may be permitted to congratulate one's friends sometimes on being imprudent. Congratulations are especially appropriate in the present instance, because I should imagine that, as a rule, you look a very long time before you leap. We can't all be romantic—I myself, for instance, am distressingly the reverse—but that is rather our misfortune than our fault; and nothing is more refreshing than to see an unromantic person doing a romantic thing. Still, I hope you won't give up all idea of political life just yet; that would be almost a pity, I think."

He assured her that he fully intended to enter Parliament and remain there, if only a majority of the electors could be brought to intrust their interests to him, and this for a time gave the conversation another turn. But Miss Huntley soon harked back to the subject of Kitty Greenwood, in whose praise it seemed as if she could not find anything strong enough to say. So eulogistic was she that at length Gilbert, somewhat bewildered by a line of criticism which he had not anticipated, and a trifle vexed by the reiterated impli-

cation that he was fortunate beyond his deserts, began insensibly to point to the reverse of the medal and to hint that, although Kitty might be worth a sacrifice, a sacrifice had not the less been made for her sake. He caught himself in the act of saying that a man who has gone certain lengths in the heedlessness of youth can't honourably retreat, and broke off, red and ashamed, in the middle of his sentence.

Miss Huntley did not seem to see his embarrassment. "Are you by any chance going to Morden this afternoon?" she asked; "and if you are, may I drive you there? I do so want to see Kitty again."

He could not, of course, do otherwise than accept this offer gratefully; and soon afterwards he was seated in a low phaeton, drawn by a pair of well-matched cobs, and driven by Miss Huntley with the ease of a practised whip. She contrived to keep him very well amused by the way. She never in her wanderings lost touch of the fashionable world, its sayings and doings, whereas Gilbert, the moment that he left London, felt himself as utterly excluded as if he were dead from the society which he loved all the more dearly because he did not, strictly speaking, belong to it. Therefore both the matter and the manner of Miss Huntley's talk fell refreshingly upon ears which for so many weeks had been listening to quite another style of conversation; and of this she was doubtless aware. She may even have been also aware that the effect produced upon her hearer was not entirely pleasurable, and that by degrees he became affected with a vague restlessness and dissatisfaction, as exiles are moved first to joy and then to tears by the accents of their fatherland.

"How completely out of it one is down here!" he exclaimed, with a sigh.

To which she responded cheerfully, "Oh, you will be glad enough to be out of it for a few months after a session or two. The time is rapidly approaching when Parliament will meet before Christmas, and sit until the second week in August."

He sighed again, wondering whether he would be able to afford a London house, and whether, if he could do so, it would be such a house and in such a neighbourhood as to enable him to receive the friends whom he was chiefly desirous of retaining. This was a point which he had latterly debated more than once with painful misgivings. He dismissed it impatiently, as he had dismissed it before, with the perfectly just reflection that it was too late to repine at comparative poverty now, and that he must be contented with such good luck as had fallen to his share.

Nor, in truth, did that luck present itself under an unfavourable aspect when Kitty, who had seen the approach of the phaeton from afar, came to the door to greet her lover and embrace her visitor. There was no need to draw comparisons between these two reunited friends. Certainly Miss Huntley's dress was more skilfully cut than Kitty's; but a woman with her income would have been inexcusable if her gowns had been badly cut; and if she had a certain air which was lacking in a provincial maiden, what else could be expected? Each was charming in her own way.

The warm-hearted Greenwoods, at any rate, found Miss Huntley charming, and loudly proclaimed their joy at her return. The Admiral bustled into the draw-

ing-room, where she was seated between his wife and daughter, and joined in their demonstrations with much heartiness.

"Well, Miss Huntley, you make us all very proud; upon my word you do! The whole world to choose from, and you have chosen Kingscliff! I shouldn't wonder if Buswell were to mention that in one of his huge painted advertisements. A business-like man, Buswell, and uncommonly useful to us at the present juncture, I can tell you. Our friend there is to be our future M.P., you know, and we shall count upon your assistance to get him in."

But she shook her head laughingly, and, unfastening her jacket, pointed to a small yellow enamel brooch, fashioned in the shape of a primrose, which she wore at her neck. "Sent me by Clementina," she explained, "with instructions to display it at all times and places until further orders. Would you expose me to the risk of being disowned by my family for ever?"

"Perhaps, as you have no vote, and as your outdoor servants won't be upon the register, we may forgive you for sporting that ugly symbol," answered the Admiral; "but it is a sad thing to think of your being still in the darkness of Toryism, Miss Huntley."

"I was born and bred in a Tory atmosphere," she said. "If I haven't yet seen the error of my ways it is the fault of Mr. Segrave, who undertook to convert me, and abandoned his enterprise before he was half way through it. Naturally, I have had a relapse, and I'm afraid there won't be time to instruct my ignorance of the difference between tweedledum and tweedledee before the end of November."

However, as Gilbert soon discovered, she was neither so ignorant of these distinctions nor so persuaded of their microscopic character as she chose to pretend. She did not remain long at the Greenwoods' that afternoon; but he met her there again on the following day, and walked home with her; and as they walked she spoke of the future distribution of parties with a shrewdness which both surprised and fascinated him.

"Whatever you do," she said, "don't go in for extreme Radicalism. The country isn't Radical yet; or if it is, that is only a passing fit, which will be followed by a reaction when the inevitable European war breaks out. It is quite true that the mass of the electors neither know nor care anything about foreign politics; but the result of having no foreign policy will be brought home to them before they are much older, and then they will get frightened and angry. Join the moderates and bide your time. It is the fashion to laugh at these men, but they are the men who will come to the front as soon as they have found out what to call themselves, and when once they are in the saddle it won't be easy to form a strong opposition to them. At your age you can very well afford to wait through one Parliament without committing yourself."

Now these opinions, whether wise or not, seemed so to Gilbert, because they happened to chime in with his own; nor was it only with regard to the position which he should take up in the House that Miss Huntley had sound advice to offer him. According to her—and here again he was quite of her mind—it is not in public life alone that the path to office and honours is to be found. To be acquainted with Cabinet

Ministers and the wives of Cabinet Ministers is an advantage which a man of tact may easily turn to account, and which, at the very least, must render his existence more enjoyable and exciting than it could otherwise be.

"The great thing," she declared, "is to be seen and known. That is both a means and an end; and if one is to be neither the one nor the other one might almost as well be planting cabbages at Beckton as sitting in the House of Commons, night after night, listening to weary, dreary debates."

Such sentiments found a ready echo in Gilbert's heart; nor is it surprising that they should also have set him speculating upon the probable future career of Miss Huntley's husband. That lucky individual would, at all events, have what was denied to him—unlimited command of ready money and a house at which the best of good company would congregate.

It was not in the course of one or even two interviews similar to the above that Gilbert succeeded in making himself thoroughly discontented. The greater part of his leisure time was spent with Kitty, and spent more pleasantly, perhaps also more profitably, than in devising ambitious schemes. But Kitty, in spite of the claims of her lover and of the canvassing labours which she had undertaken on his behalf, had not severed her connection with St. Michael's, and it frequently happened that her presence was required at the church or the vicarage after the daily five o'clock evensong. Gilbert was wont to accompany her so far and then to take his way homewards; but now that the evenings were drawing in, it was dull work to sit all alone in the great empty house at Beckton, waiting for the dinner-

bell to ring; and what could be more natural than that a forlorn bachelor should turn aside to the Manor House for a cup of tea and a little improving conversation? As a matter of fact, he did so turn aside nearly every day, and about this time Kitty noted with satisfaction that he ceased to grumble at her for "making herself a slave to that immaculate parson."

One cannot please everybody. These evening visits, these prolonged *tête-à-têtes* by the firelight, which seemed to give so much pleasure to Gilbert, and in which Kitty—who was duly informed of them—acquiesced quite cheerfully, were a source of deep disquietude and disgust to Miss Joy. Not often had she ventured to read a lecture to the somewhat imperious lady whose nominal chaperon she was; still, being a courageous and conscientious woman, she felt it incumbent upon her one morning to say—

"Beatrice, dear, Mr. Segrave comes here too often."

"Does he?" asked Beatrice with innocent simplicity. "Well, now that you mention it, I dare say he does. He hasn't begun to bore me yet though."

"I don't mean that; I mean that he comes here too often for his happiness—and perhaps for Miss Greenwood's into the bargain."

"Matilda, my beloved, are you so desperately anxious for his happiness?"

"I don't care a brass farthing whether he is happy or unhappy; it is about you that I am anxious," answered Miss Joy candidly.

"Oh!—neither about him nor about poor Kitty, then, after all? Now be honest, Matilda: don't you think that I am pretty well able to take care of myself?"

"Most certainly I do not," Miss Joy declared; "that is just exactly what I don't think."

"How little you know me! Some day you will admit your mistake. In the meantime, if it would relieve you to speak a word of warning to Mr. Segrave or to Kitty, or to both of them, pray do so. Nobody will be the worse for it."

"And nobody will be the better," sighed Miss Joy, conscious of her impotence.

The excellent woman saw plainly that neither warnings or remonstrances would be of any avail, and therefore held her peace; but she was sorely distressed in mind, for Gilbert, of whom she had never thought too highly, had forfeited the last vestige of her esteem by his present behaviour; and what was still worse, she found herself compelled to admit that Beatrice was behaving quite as badly as he. That was as much as to say that the world was upside down.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, the little world in which Miss Joy dwelt was composed for the most part of people who could not easily believe their bosom friends capable of treachery. The soft, misty autumn days passed on and brought no clouds over the contentment of the Greenwood family. Kitty, it is true, remarked that Gilbert was nervous and irritable at times; but this she attributed to election worries, and was too sweet tempered to resent. As for jealousy, that had never been among her failings. Certainly she had been a little jealous of Beatrice Huntley once upon a time, and had confessed that peccadillo, half penitently, half laughingly, to Gilbert long ago. In those days she had not been sure of his love—she was sure of it now, and

it would have required something a great deal more serious than his visits to the Manor House to make her distrust him. As reasonably might he have distrusted her for making much of Mitchell, who at this time was far more constantly with her than Gilbert was with Miss Huntley. For Mitchell's goods and chattels were being packed up. Somewhat suddenly he had announced his appointment to another coast-guard station in the north of England, and Kitty, who divined that the transfer had not been unsolicited, felt that the least she could do was to make his last days at Kingscliff as pleasant for him as might be. On the eve of his departure a few friends were invited to a farewell dinner in his honour at Morden Court; and then it was that Miss Huntley and he had a little talk together for the first time since her return; for although they had met before, neither of them had displayed much anxiety to compare notes with the other. Now, however, she beckoned him aside to say:

"So you are retiring from the field of battle."

"That is the usual thing to do after one has been beaten, is it not?" he returned.

"One should not allow one's self to be so easily beaten."

"Well, I don't know about that; under certain circumstances defeat is inevitable, I suppose."

"And a bungling ally is not quite the right person to make criticisms, perhaps?"

"Oh, you mustn't put words into my mouth that I never used, Miss Huntley. I know you did your best for me—and very kind it was of you, I'm sure."

"Nevertheless, I miscalculated my strength; and you didn't think much of my tactics, did you?"

Mitchell hesitated.

"You never told me what your tactics were," he replied at length; "but as far as I could understand them, they weren't exactly—well, I don't think I should have employed them myself. The fact is, I believe honesty to be the best policy."

Miss Huntley did not appear to relish the condemnation which she had invited; for she frowned and shut up her fan with a snap.

"That sounds a very rude thing to say," Mitchell went on apologetically; "but what I mean is that in these cases it is really all plain sailing. She didn't care for me, and she did care for Segrave. That seems to me to be final. I couldn't make her care for me."

"Oh, excuse me; that doesn't follow at all. And how do you know that she cares for Mr. Segrave? How do you know that the person with whom she is in love isn't an imaginary being whom she will never find inside Mr. Segrave's skin?"

But this was too subtle for the straightforward Mitchell, who shook his head and answered:

"It would be no kindness to encourage me, Miss Huntley, even if you could. But you can't. I must grin and bear it. The only thing is that I find I can't bear to stay here, and that is why I'm off to Berwick-on-Tweed."

"Leaving the enemy in possession."

"Oh, I don't want to call him the enemy. He and I have never hit it off together particularly well; but

most people like him, and after all, he is the man whom she has chosen to be her husband."

"And suppose the man whom she has chosen to be her husband should break her heart some fine day?"

"In that case, I shouldn't think twice about breaking his head."

"A very useful and practical measure, though hardly to be described as either prevention or cure. Perhaps you wouldn't carry it out, though; perhaps by that time you may have found consolation on one side or other of the border."

Mitchell reddened.

"Look here, Miss Huntley," said he a little roughly; "I have known Kitty Greenwood since she was a child in the schoolroom, and I have never in all my life loved another woman. I don't know that it matters very much what you may think of me; but if you think that I shall 'find consolation,' as you call it, at this time of day, you make a mistake."

"Don't be angry," she returned, laughing; "I give you full credit for constancy, though I can't say as much for your perseverance. Apparently, your notion of fighting a battle isn't the same as mine. If I were in your place, I should say to myself that all was not lost so long as the girl whom I loved remained unmarried, that engagements have been broken off before now, and that when a woman looks at a rejected lover with tears in her eyes, it is because she is beginning to find out what he is worth."

"She didn't look at me with tears in her eyes!" exclaimed Mitchell. "What do you mean?"

"Did she not? I suppose I must have been de-

ceived, then, when I caught a glimpse of her across the dinner-table. Perhaps she had swallowed an overdose of mustard, or she may have been dazzled by the brilliancy of her prospects. To be sure she might have wept all the tears of Niobe before you would have seen them; for your own eyes don't seem to be as sharp as a sailor's ought to be. Since you won't use them at Kingscliff, perhaps you may as well be at Berwick-on-Tweed as here. It wouldn't be a bad plan to take a return-ticket though."

"What do you mean?" asked Mitchell, for the second time.

"That you will be wanted to act as best man to Mr. Segrave on his wedding-day, of course. What else should I mean? and what part could suit you better? You have chosen to surrender to him without striking a blow; it is only fit that you should walk in his triumph."

Mitchell drove home that night with a young man who was loud in his commendation of Miss Huntley, her beauty, her talents, and her amiability. The elder man listened for a long time with that silence which is said to imply assent; but at length he responded:

"Miss Huntley may be all that you say, and I should think she is; but between you and me, I doubt whether she is quite right in the upper story."

It was this impression of her, and no other, that he took away with him to Berwick-on-Tweed.

CHAPTER XIII.

GILBERT MAKES PROGRESS.

THE more Gilbert thought of it the more he became convinced that he had been guilty of a lamentable error in judgment in proposing to Kitty Greenwood. It is not with impunity that a man who has taken cold reason for his guide through life allows himself to be swayed by a gust of feeling, and even if Miss Huntley had never crossed his path again the day would full surely have arrived when Gilbert would have repented him of his rashness. But Miss Huntley had come, armed in all the suggestive panoply of wealth, beauty, and worldly wisdom, and this had caused lame Nemesis to put her best foot foremost—had, perhaps, as Gilbert now told himself without any circumlocution, rendered it possible for him to escape Nemesis even at the eleventh hour. The means by which she had accomplished this end have already been indicated, and it is neither necessary nor agreeable to dwell further upon them. She had an apt disciple and an easy task.

By no means so easy was that which, before the month of October was out, Gilbert had determined to undertake. It is no light matter to be a traitor to love, honour, and duty, to desert the girl of your heart without the shadow of a plausible excuse for so doing, and to brave the scorn of your friends and neighbours. Yet doubtless the thing may be done, if only all scruples be resolutely cast to the winds, and this latter feat was more within Gilbert's capacity than it had once been. He did, indeed, repeat to himself certain glib and con-

ventional phrases, as, for example, that a mistake ought always to be corrected, no matter how, while correction remains practicable; that in Kitty's interest as well as his own it would be wise and right to terminate an engagement which had been entered into without sufficient consideration, and so forth; but these things he said rather for form's sake and because he disliked a raw style of argumentation than to quiet an uneasy conscience. Besides, it is a waste of time to seek out reasons for doing what you have already made up your mind to do. The really difficult question was how to do it. Now a lady who has thrown over her betrothed sometimes has hard things said of her; but everybody must concede that her position is preferable to that of a lady who has been thrown over. Clearly, then, every facility should be afforded to Kitty for taking the initiative in this delicate affair. Nor would there have been much trouble about the rendering of this service to her if she had but been a little less wilfully blind. She either did not see, or did not choose to show that she saw, what any other girl must have seen in her place; her lover's evident preference for Miss Huntley's society did not, apparently, shake her faith in him for a moment; her cheerfulness, good-humour, and insensibility to neglect were as admirable as they were exasperating. The only thing that could be said for such conduct was that it made Gilbert's path a little smoother for him, by causing him to doubt seriously whether he ever could have been really in love with so stupid a woman. Yet he could not bring himself to tell her in so many words that he no longer considered her to be a suitable wife for him. To do that would have been to

incur an amount of public obloquy which he dared not face, and which he could hardly expect to live down under a year or two, backed though he might probably be by all the power of Miss Huntley's riches and social influence. No! by hook or by crook, Kitty must be forced to give him his dismissal. It will be observed that he had made progress since the time when it cost him a sleepless night and much expenditure of casuistry to resolve upon cheating his brother. Then he had been sincerely desirous of effecting some sort of a *modus vivendi* with his conscience: now his sole anxiety was to save appearances.

Miss Greenwood may be acquitted of the accusation of stupidity brought against her. That she did not suspect the man whom she loved of a baseness which, if proved, would have made it impossible for her to love him any longer, is the less surprising because the evidences thereof had not been brought very directly under her notice; but she was perfectly aware that a change had come over him, that he had ceased to take pleasure in the kind of conversation which, however silly it may be in itself, is generally found pleasant by lovers, and that her total ignorance of politics, which, during the summer-time, he had been wont to laugh at and treat as a joke, had now become a vexation to him. She was not a clever girl, but she was a modest and a sensible one; so, instead of upbraiding him, she set to work to correct the shortcoming which she judged to be the cause of his displeasure and began to read the daily papers diligently, with a view to rendering herself more fit to become the wife of an earnest politician. As the Admiral took in the *Times* and the *Daily News*,

while Mrs. Greenwood (who was a Conservative at heart) took the *Morning Post*, this method of study did not tend to free her from bewilderment; and when, after carefully weighing all that she had read about the state of Ireland, she took upon herself to propound a truly ingenious scheme for the pacification of that luckless island, she was properly rebuked for her temerity.

Gilbert gave her one look of profound astonishment, and then said quietly, "My dear Kitty, do you happen by any chance to know what a contradiction in terms is? You can illustrate it, at all events, if you can't define it. I grant you that it is sometimes employed effectively by public speakers; but then they don't usually make it quite as plain as a pikestaff. If you are ambitious of excelling in that line, you had better take a few lessons from your friend Monckton, who is past master in the art of humbugging his audiences."

This was only a random shot, but it went home. Kitty did not mind being snubbed, because she thought that very likely she deserved it; but not even from Gilbert would she listen to a word against her beloved Vicar.

"Mr. Monckton never humbugged anybody in his life," she declared vehemently, "and what is more, I don't believe you think it of him."

Then she jumped up and left the room, lest she should be compelled to hear more than she could bear.

Perhaps this little scene may have shown Gilbert where to look for the weapon of which he was in search. At any rate, from that day forth he never missed an opportunity of sneering at St. Michael's, its elaborate services, its guilds, its heterogeneous con-

gregation, and the doctrines which he assumed to be promulgated from its pulpit. In this way he certainly managed to give Kitty a good deal of pain; but he might have known better than to imagine that such a device would cause her to shrink away from him. She was something of a zealot; like most women, she was intolerant of any form of faith save her own, but disposed to be indulgent towards indifference, especially towards the indifference of men. Gilbert's attitude had hitherto been indifferent, but not hostile, and she had secretly hoped that when he should be all her own she would be able to bring a beneficial influence to bear upon him; but if, as he now gave her to understand, he rejected not only Mr. Monckton's views, but Christianity itself, it clearly behoved her to put off no longer the work which seemed to be especially marked out for her. She felt herself on firmer ground here than on the quicksands of politics, and did not fear ultimate failure, because she was sure that Gilbert was noble, virtuous, and conscientious, and that his scepticism only arose from that lack of humility which was but natural in one of his vast intellectual capacity.

Thus began a theological contest of which the inconsequence must often have been ludicrously apparent to one of the disputants, but which Kitty's patience prevented from ever degenerating into a quarrel. Gilbert could be ironical, bitter, and even covertly insolent, but he could not be brutal; and it seemed as if nothing short of downright brutality would serve his purpose.

Help reached him at length from a quarter in which help was assuredly no expression of good-will. The

time was approaching for the first representation of Brian's opera, and Miss Huntley, to whom the date had been duly notified, was determined that Kingscliff should be well represented in the audience. However, Admiral and Mrs. Greenwood, after promising to be present, begged off. They hated leaving home: the Admiral had caught a cold in his head, and his wife could not trust him to take care of himself if he were left alone; so they gladly accepted Miss Huntley's offer of a bedroom in Park Lane for Kitty. Kitty herself was delighted at the prospect of this outing until she discovered that, for some reason or other, Gilbert was opposed to her taking part in it. He suggested that it might be disagreeable for her to stay in the house of a lady with whom she was not acquainted, and who was not always polite to strangers; he alleged that nothing but a sense of fraternal duty induced him to undertake what was sure to be a tiring and tedious expedition. The truth was that he objected, partly because he had of late taken to objecting to everything that Kitty wished to do, and partly because he dreaded the conclusions which Brian might draw from watching him and Beatrice and Kitty together. And yet, heaven knows that Brian's eyes were not over quick at discovering infamy.

The upshot of it was, that when Miss Joy incidentally asked Kitty whether the matter was settled, the girl replied that she had not quite made up her mind, adding innocently, "I don't think Gilbert much wants me to go."

Now Miss Joy was neither a reticent nor a prudent woman, and for some weeks past she had been bottling

up her emotions until she was like to explode with the effervescence of them. Nothing more than this comparative trifle was needed to set her free from the restraint of her better judgment.

"Want you to go? I should think not!" she cried, a fine accession of colour coming into her cheeks. "And that is just why you ought to go, and stick to him like a leech the whole time! If I were you I wouldn't leave him alone for one moment, either here or in London, or anywhere else."

Well, the moment that the words were out she regretted them, and then, of course, she had to explain, and equally, of course, her explanation did not mend matters. There was no real harm done yet, she declared; all would come right; she had spoken too hastily. Beatrice, without perhaps quite intending it, had a way of taking men up and monopolising them, and if the man happened to be conceited or easily flattered—as almost all men are—trouble was apt to ensue. Kitty did not say much, but the revelation was far more of a shock to her than her informant would have believed possible. Not once had it crossed her mind that Beatrice could be guilty of the conduct ascribed to her, still less had she supposed that Gilbert's recent coldness could be due to such a cause. Even now she did not believe the assertion which Miss Joy had carefully left unuttered. It was inconceivable to her that Gilbert could be false; it must be Beatrice, and Beatrice alone, who was to blame. That one who professed to be her friend should be trying to do her a deadly injury (for, simple though Kitty was, she saw through Miss Joy's euphemisms) was bad enough; nor

was it without great difficulty that she forced herself to greet the traitress as smilingly as usual on the following day.

Beatrice appeared as early as eleven o'clock in the morning, she and Miss Joy having been driven over in a waggonette by Gilbert, and whatever may have been her sins they did not, apparently, weigh heavily upon her conscience.

"We have come to carry you off for the day, Kitty," she announced; "so if you have any parochial duties on hand you will please to neglect them. Old women and school-children can be attended to in all weathers, but Halcombe caves are only open to the public when there is a light breeze from the north-west, and we can't expect to have many days like this in November."

Kitty did not attempt to excuse herself. She was not precisely in the mood to enjoy a party of pleasure; but escape seemed hardly practicable, added to which she was anxious to have the testimony of her own senses as to whether Beatrice was or was not the false friend that she had been represented to be.

Her senses, during the eight-mile drive to Halcombe, were more pleasantly employed than in the acquisition of evidence bearing upon that point. Gilbert, who was driving, only threw an occasional remark over his shoulder to the three ladies behind him, and they for their parts were intimate enough to be absolved from the wearisome obligation of racking their brains for subjects to talk about. Their way lay along a rather rough road, which sometimes skirted the sea and sometimes took an abrupt turn inland, passing

through sleepy little villages of white-washed houses, overgrown for the most part with climbing fuchsias, dipping into deep lanes, where glossy hart's-tongue ferns clothed the red soil, and crossing hills, as west-country roads commonly do, by the simple old Roman expedient of going straight up one side and straight down the other. During the summer season Halcombe and its caverns are visited daily by herds of those holiday-makers from whom Kingscliff will never again be free, and probably does not wish to be free. All along the road you meet or pass them—four or five of them generally, packed into an open one-horse fly. Not unfrequently they sing as they go. Every now and then they pause, leap out of their vehicle with one consent, and make a furious onslaught upon the ferns, which they tear up by the roots and afterwards throw away. The course of their passage is marked by broken victuals, empty ginger-beer bottles, and fluttering scraps of greasy paper. It may be hoped that they enjoy themselves, though it cannot be said that they contribute to the enjoyment of their neighbours. But on this still, soft November day, the quiet country had regained possession of itself; the last of the tourists had long since gone back to native London or Bristol, and the equinoctial gales and rains had made a clean sweep of their traces. Soon—in a day or two, perhaps—winter would set in, the yellow leaves would fall in showers, and the sun would retire behind a grey veil to show himself no more, save by faint and feeble gleams, until the return of spring. But for the moment the air was as mild as if it had been midsummer, the sky overhead was of an Italian blue, and Kitty, whose spirits,

like those of ninety-nine mortals out of a hundred, depended to a great extent upon the weather, could not for the life of her help hoping that the worthy Miss Joy had discovered a mare's-nest. Miss Joy was a dear old thing, but nobody would ever think of calling her a very acute observer; and really the whole story was utterly improbable. It was not in the least like Beatrice Huntley to play so ignoble a part, nor was Gilbert at all the sort of man to let his head be turned by a little attention or flattery.

And so, when they reached the small fishing-hamlet of Halcombe, where Gilbert put up his horses and where they embarked in a roomy rowing-boat, she was ready to dismiss all her fears and was somewhat ashamed of having entertained them.

The Halcombe caves are hardly to be compared with the blue grotto of Capri; still their natural picturesqueness, their reputed vast extent and the difficulty of visiting them (for they can only be entered at low water, and not then unless the wind be off shore), have earned for them a certain local celebrity, enhanced by the usual legends which have smugglers and the crews of revenue cutters for their heroes. It was easy for Beatrice Huntley, who had the knack of ingratiating herself with all sorts and conditions of men, to draw deliberate narratives of this description from one of the stalwart rowers; and if, in his polite anxiety to interest his hearers, he made some startling assertions, these were accepted without a symptom of incredulity; for Halcombe is included in the Kingscliff division, and there are voters who dislike to be accused of mendacity, notwithstanding the direct encouragement thereto

afforded by the Ballot Act and advocated by some of the admirers of that measure.

The water at the mouth of the caves being still too high to admit of the entrance of a boat, it was agreed to disembark, spread out the luncheon upon a broad, sunny rock and wait for the ebb. Many years ago there appeared in *Punch* the representation of a picnic at which one of John Leech's large-eyed, crinolined young ladies was made to tell her Edwin reproachfully that he could not truly love her, since he had helped somebody else to the liver-wing of a chicken and had handed her the leg. Kitty Greenwood was neither greedy nor exacting; yet she could not help observing that some such marks of attention as this were paid by Gilbert to Beatrice at her expense; she noticed, too, what was more significant, that his voice in addressing Beatrice was soft and low, whereas it took a distinctly harder intonation when he spoke to herself. These were trifles; but in spite of her determination to be reasonable, she was disquieted by them, and before the repast was over it seemed to her that the sun no longer shone so brightly.

At the end of an hour they all got into the boat again, and, stooping low to save their heads, passed into the twilight of the echoing cavern. It was not very far, however, that the boat could take them, and as they were bent upon penetrating some little distance into the unknown depths, they stepped out upon a strip of shingle and lighted the candles which they had brought with them.

Now, what is a single man to do when he has to look after three ladies, all of whom require to be as-

sisted over boulders slippery with seaweed? Having but two hands, it is evident that he can only be of use to one of his charges, and perhaps a very good and impartial man would feel bound to select the one most stricken in years; but Gilbert, instead of placing his services at the disposition of Miss Joy, attached himself resolutely to Beatrice, and Kitty, who was a little in advance, had the mortification of hearing her say, "Oh, never mind me; go and help Kitty." To which there was a muttered rejoinder too indistinct for her to catch. Naturally, she plunged forwards at once and floundered on at some little risk to her limbs—for the surface of the rocks was really treacherous—until she was stopped by a chasm over which not even a very angry lady could leap without aid. Gilbert, when he caught her up and perceived her dilemma, jumped across and, taking her hand, pulled her after him—with unnecessary roughness, she thought. At any rate, her foot slipped on landing and she came down on her knees, extinguishing her candle and receiving some slight abrasions.

"Mind what you are about!" he exclaimed sharply; "you'll be spraining your ankle or something presently."

There are limits to everybody's patience. "Help me back again, please," said Kitty; "I shall not go any farther. You and Beatrice had better go on by yourselves."

Beatrice, who had managed to negotiate, unassisted, the obstacle which had puzzled her predecessor, entered a formal protest; but Gilbert said nothing, and Kitty, whose suggestion was adopted after a brief parley, sat

down in much bitterness of spirit to await the return of her more adventurous companions. She did not care to join Miss Joy, who had already beaten a retreat to the boat, but chose rather to crouch down in a most uncomfortable attitude, grasping her candle and listening to the voices of Gilbert and Beatrice, who appeared to find scrambling over rocks and splashing into pools a very exhilarating pastime. She had to wait a long time—nearly ten minutes, in point of fact, which her imagination excusably magnified into half an hour. There was no occasion for anxiety about the absentees; they were not lost, for she could hear their laughter; but evidently they were in no hurry to retrace their steps. When at length they did approach she arose and fled before them, not wishing them to know where she had been; and presently the whole boatload emerged, blinking, into the broad light of day once more.

And now Miss Joy, looking across the bay towards Kingscliff and becoming aware of certain atmospheric effects which might have daunted Turner, must needs demand her paint-box and sketch-book, lest the memory of that glorious golden mist should perish for want of a skilled interpreter. Possibly it may not have been mere accident that made her unusually fidgety about the disposal of her implements and caused her to declare that nobody but Beatrice knew how to arrange these to her satisfaction. Anyhow, an opportunity was thus given to Kitty by which the latter was not slow to profit.

“Gilbert!” she called softly; and as he stepped to her side, saying, “Well, what is it?” she walked on for

some little distance without replying. She had thought over what she had to say to him, and very sensible and well-put this premeditated speech was; yet, when he repeated his question impatiently, she could not get out one word of it, but simply turned a pair of blue eyes, swimming in tears, upon him and murmured; "I don't think it was very kind of you to leave me like that."

He did not see her eyes: he was looking down on the ground and kicking pebbles before him. "I understood," said he, "that you wished to be left."

"I did not wish to be a trouble to you, of course. You seemed to like being with Beatrice best, and—and you spoke so crossly, Gilbert, and you were such a very, *very* long time away, and——"

A suspicious break in the speaker's voice cut short this remonstrance. It was not a very dignified or coherent one, to be sure; but if the man had had any heart at all, he must have been a little touched by it. Gilbert was not in the least touched. He smiled in a singularly provoking manner, and remarked:

"Oh, I see! Well, my dear Kitty, I don't know what your religious principles may have to say to you about jealousy; but I can assure you that if you give way to it you will make a scourge for your own back, from which I can't undertake to relieve you. Please try to realise that you are not going to marry a country parson, or even a stay-at-home country squire. I must live in the world, I must mix with women of the world, and I must show them the civility that they expect. If that makes you jealous, I can't help it."

"I don't want to be jealous," answered poor Kitty.

"It isn't your being civil to Beatrice Huntley, or to any one else, that I mind, and I am willing to lead whatever kind of life you choose, if only I can feel sure that you always love me."

"I should have thought," said Gilbert coldly, "that I had given as strong proofs of that as you could wish for; but I am afraid you are rather insatiable. To content you I should have to put on a surplice and read the lessons at St. Michael's every Sunday; I should have to bow meekly to what you are pleased to call the ordinances of the Church, and I suppose I should never be allowed to go into society without you. If your happiness depends upon the carrying out of some such programme as that—and I suspect that it does—had you not better reconsider your position while there is still time?"

This was plain speaking with a vengeance, and Kitty was staggered and bewildered by it. She had anticipated a lover's quarrel and a reconciliation; she was offered, as it seemed, a business-like bargain which she was free to accept or decline, as she pleased.

"I—I don't think I quite understand," she faltered "You have been so odd lately. Have I offended you?—or is it that—oh, Gilbert, do you really love her, and not me?"

"You mean Miss Huntley?" he asked. "No, I am not in love with Miss Huntley, and perhaps her name had better be left out of the discussion. The question between us is not whether I am in love with somebody else, but whether you are in love with me. You say I have been odd lately, though I am not conscious of having changed any of my habits or opinions. May

it not rather be that you have changed?—or at least that you have found out that I am not the man you took me for?”

He was desirous of opening her eyes; he did not see—because his own were still fixed upon the ground—how effectually he was doing so. The girl—if he had known it—was looking at him with amazement and with something akin to horror. To deceive a loving, trusting woman is not difficult; but to shake her trust and at the same time to continue to deceive her requires more delicacy of touch than Gilbert had thought it worth while to bring to this enterprise.

“Perhaps you are right; perhaps you are not—quite what I took you for,” she said in a low voice.

Yet she did not add the words which he expected and was waiting for. She did not give him his release, but turned and walked slowly back to the spot where Miss Joy was busy dashing in what looked like a hasty study of a conflagration, he following her in silence.

The colour had left her cheeks, but she was perfectly composed, and during the remainder of the afternoon she bore herself much as usual. Only, after they had started on their homeward drive, she said casually to Beatrice, “By the way, I have made up my mind not to go to London with you to-morrow. For several reasons, I would rather stay at home.”

And when Beatrice wanted to know what these reasons might be, she did not state them, but simply repeated, “I would rather stay at home.”

CHAPTER XIV.

SIR JOSEPH IS PERTURBED.

As the time drew near for the submission of *The King's Veto* to the judgment of a remorseless public, all those interested in the experiment became nervous and short-tempered, with one notable exception. While the manager of the Ambiguity stormed and raved over small *contre-temps* which he would hardly have noticed a month before, while the tenor wrangled with the soprano, and the leader of the orchestra tore his hair, and Phipps could get no sleep at nights without having recourse to sedatives, Brian, so far from showing symptoms of uneasiness, grew daily more cheerful and smiling.

"I never saw such a fellow as you are!" Phipps exclaimed with pardonable impatience; "one would think that it was quite the same thing to you whether we fail or succeed. Pray, do you realise that this will make a man or a mouse of you? I can afford to come to grief; I have made my name, and if people don't like me in this line, that won't prevent them from flocking to the next play that I shall write. But you—why, it's almost a matter of life and death for you! A débutant who misses his first chance has to wait some time before he gets a second, I can tell you."

"Oh, but we shall not come to grief," answered Brian easily.

The truth was that he could not bring himself to care quite so much about the fate of this opera as his friend did. It had been transmogrified, bit by bit, until it was no longer his opera, but Phipps's play set

to music, which was a very different thing. The music was pretty and the dialogue was clever, so that there was every probability of its going down; but he was unable to regard it as being in any sense the *magnum opus* which must decide whether he had a career before him or not. He had satisfied himself that his strength did not lie in that particular kind of composition; he knew that he could do a great deal better; and as for the pecuniary side of the question, that was no longer of supreme importance to him. However, it was neither confidence in his abilities nor the approaching termination of suspense that made his heart beat high and his eyes sparkle, but the prospect of seeing Beatrice Huntley once more in the course of a few short days. It was ridiculous, and he often told himself that it was so. The sight of her could only mean a renewal of pangs which absence and occupation had rendered to some extent less sharp, and a man who knows his love to be hopeless should at least take care that a hopeless business does not remain the chief concern of his life. Nevertheless, he rejoiced when he thought of the happiness that awaited him. Would she remain a week or more in London? Most likely she would; for is it not in November that ladies have to purchase winter gowns and bonnets and such things? And no doubt she would allow him to go and see her, since nothing had been said about her sister-in-law being in London, and he assumed that only Miss Joy would be in the house with her.

That this conjecture was not altogether accurate he learnt from the following note, which he found at his club one morning:

Park Lane, November 3, 1885.

"DEAR SIR,

"My sister and I hope that, if you are not too busy or otherwise engaged, you will give us the pleasure of your company at dinner to-morrow. You will meet your brother, who, I understand, has come up to London in order to witness the first representation of your opera, for the success of which pray accept my best wishes. Lady Clementina much regrets that her engagements do not allow of her leaving the country at present, but hopes later in the year to have an opportunity of enjoying *The Duke's Motto*.

"Believe me, dear sir, faithfully yours,

"JOSEPH HUNTLEY."

This was very civil; and if Sir Joseph had not got the title of the piece quite right, he had made as good a shot at it as could be expected of a man who never went to theatres and considered blue-books to be a far more fascinating form of literature than plays. It was satisfactory, too, that Lady Clementina would shine by her absence on this occasion. The master of the house was not likely to put himself in the way of afternoon visitors.

Perhaps Brian's impatience may have caused him to forget that in the latter part of the nineteenth century people who are asked to dine at eight o'clock are not expected to show themselves before 8.15 at the very earliest; for when he was shown into Sir Joseph Huntley's drawing-room he found it tenanted by only one person, who, from the depths of the capacious arm-

chair in which he was ensconced, called out: "Is that you, Segrave? Well—here we are again, you see."

"Stapleford!" exclaimed Brian in undisguised astonishment.

"That same," replied the other. "I told you, you know, that I should be on the spot when your show opened. That's no reason for my being here to-night, you'll say; but the fact of the matter is that I've turned up in the character of the nasty man who won't take 'No' for an answer. Clem and my people have been going on at me till, to keep them quiet, I had to promise that I would try again. Of course, I know that I haven't the ghost of a chance—less now than ever—though I take it that you're as much out of the running as I am."

"I never was in the running," Brian said with something of a sigh. "As for your chance, I don't know why it should be any worse now than it was in the summer."

"Oh, you don't, eh? Haven't you heard the latest intelligence, then?"

"No; what is it?" asked Brian apprehensively, for although he had told himself a dozen times that Beatrice would be engaged to somebody before long, he dreaded the announcement which he foresaw.

"My dear chap, there's such a row in the house as never was—Clem rending her garments, and old Joe kicking up behind and before, as the poet says. It seems that no sooner had Beatrice got down to that old barrack of yours than she began to find it precious slow, and small blame to her! So what must she needs do——"

But at this moment Beatrice herself sailed into the room, and Stapleford whispered hurriedly, "I'll tell you all about it by-and-by."

This interrupted communication had conveyed to the unsuspecting Brian no inkling of the truth, and before Beatrice had been talking to him for five minutes he had forgotten all about it. It was impossible to doubt that her pleasure at seeing him again was as sincere as it was outspoken; while, for his own part, the joy of listening to her voice and gazing at her perfect profile was, for the time being, all that he asked. Stapleford, who it appeared was staying in the house, very considerately sauntered away and picked up the evening paper. Beatrice glanced after him, smiling significantly.

"Didn't I tell you," said she, in an undertone, "that he would be convalescent before Christmas?"

"But I don't think he is convalescent," Brian returned.

"Oh, yes, he is. He took the disease in a very mild form, and he has still six or seven weeks to get quite well in. Just at present he is shamming a little to please his relations, who seem to think that his is an infectious malady, and that I shall catch it if only we can be made to breathe the same air. What a bore relations are! Don't you think so? You ought, if anybody ought. I dare say you don't, though."

"I haven't a great many of them, you see," Brian remarked.

"No, to be sure. But here comes one who is a host in himself."

Gilbert greeted his brother quite affectionately. "My dear fellow, I have been meaning to write to you for

ever so long, but if you knew what an army of idiotic correspondents this election business has let loose upon me, you would forgive me for neglecting my friends."

"Everything must be forgiven to a man who is engaged to be married and has a contested election on his hands," said Brian good-humouredly. "And what have you done with Kitty?"

Gilbert shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, the old story! She promised to come with us, but at the last moment parochial claims proved too strong. The poor, frivolous world mustn't expect to win in a struggle against St. Michael and All Angels. The Admiral has caught a cold in his head, and Mrs. Greenwood won't leave him for fear he should forget to put his feet in hot water at night. They sent you all sorts of messages."

Phipps was now announced; then came Miss Joy; finally Sir Joseph, muttering apologies. Sir Joseph, Brian thought, had an anxious, harassed look—to be accounted for, possibly, by the fact that he, too, was a candidate for parliamentary honours, and that he did not feel quite so certain of re-election as he had done in former contests. He gave his arm to Miss Joy, Stapleford took Beatrice, and the remaining three men, on reaching the dining-room, disposed of themselves in the only manner possible, that is to say, that Brian had to take a chair between Stapleford and Phipps, which was not precisely the position that he coveted. However, with so small a party present, he would not have gained much by having Beatrice for his neighbour, and as a matter of fact, the conversation was general from the beginning of dinner to the end.

He took his part in it without finding it particularly

interesting. Mindful of the reproof which he had incurred once before for sitting silent at a larger gathering in the same room, he endeavoured to do his duty, sustained by the hope that this evening might end as agreeably for him as that had done. There was no reason why it should not, he thought, for how could he anticipate that when, at the expiration of two long hours, he reached the drawing-room again and was, so to speak, in sight of land, he would be button-holed by his host and forced to listen to a deliberate analysis of the state of political feeling in the country from that experienced observer? Sir Joseph's views were doubtless sagacious and entitled to attention, but they did not receive any; and it may have been because he noticed how intently his victim was gazing at the far corner of the room whither Beatrice and Gilbert had retired that he said,

"Well, there is your brother's case; it is an instance of what I was saying, that Conservatism only requires to be popularised. A few months ago his return, from what I heard, was almost a certainty. I doubt very much whether it is so now. We have got a first-rate man, Mr. Giles, to oppose him, and I should not be at all surprised if we carried the division. I have a slight acquaintance with Mr. Giles; indeed, it was from him——"

Sir Joseph paused and stroked his chin. "I hardly know whether I ought to put such a question to you," he said, speaking in an altered voice, and turning a troubled face towards Brian, "but have any—er—rumours about your brother reached you?"

"None whatever," answered Brian wonderingly; "I

haven't been in the way of hearing much Kingscliff news."

"Ah, indeed? Well, of course it is a safe rule to disregard gossip, and no doubt at election times, when a man is more or less before the public, many things are apt to be said which are best left unnoticed. At the same time, it is not so easy for those who have a deep personal interest in the matters gossiped about to be indifferent, and I must own that what Mr. Giles told me has caused great pain both to my wife and myself."

"About my brother?"

"Well, yes, and about my sister. Mr. Giles treated the whole affair as a joke. I need hardly say that he has no idea of making political capital out of it, though possibly some of his adherents may be less scrupulous. But to me it is no joke that my sister should be spoken of as having flirted with an engaged man to the extent of very nearly, if not quite, causing a rupture of his engagement. I consider it discreditable, whatever her ulterior intentions may be. In any event such a marriage would not have been exactly—— But no matter about that. At I say, I consider that, whether she marries your brother or not, she will have brought discredit upon herself and upon us."

"I don't believe a word of it!" exclaimed Brian, rather roughly.

Sir Joseph glanced at him. "That is to say that you don't believe these two people to have been guilty of the conduct imputed to them? You are, perhaps, right to allow them the benefit of any doubt that may exist upon that point, and probably you do not feel

yourself so nearly concerned in their proceedings as I do. But as to the fact of their having grounds for gossip, there cannot, unfortunately, be any doubt at all. It is the common talk of the place. Mr. Giles says that the only persons who appear to be ignorant of it are the Greenwood family."

Brian made no immediate rejoinder. It was all very well to declare that he did not believe this report, but he did believe it,—he had reasons quite apart from the tittle-tattle of Kingscliff for believing it,—and it was as if this stout, respectable, commonplace man had planted a dagger in his heart. That Gilbert should be a traitor was not surprising; he had never really recovered his trust in Gilbert, though he had ceased to think bitterly of him. But that Beatrice was unworthy of the love which he had given her, and which, despite her unworthiness, he could not recall, was a hard thing to admit. Yet the admission had to be made. Blows of that kind stimulate the action of the brain when they do not arrest it, and he saw quite clearly that she was without excuse. It did not seem to him to be proved that she would marry Gilbert. She might—and indeed that would be very characteristic of her—intend to throw him over, after preventing a marriage which she thought likely to turn out unhappily. But, whatever might be her motives, the fact must remain that she was trying to bring dishonour upon a man whom she treated as a friend and misery upon a girl for whom she professed to feel sincere affection. "She is utterly heartless," he thought sadly; and it may be that this judgment upon her had been in his mind once or twice before, though it had never until now found expression.

To Sir Joseph he only replied, "I am very sorry to hear what you tell me, but I am afraid I can do nothing."

"H'm! I am a peaceable man, Mr. Segrave; but if a brother of mine were to behave as your brother is behaving, I should have a word or two to say to him—a word or two to say to him. As for Beatrice, I have thought it my duty to speak to her, and have been met, as I expected to be, by a reminder that she is her own mistress now. However, she has agreed to return to the country with me and to stay a week."

There was a solemnity and even something of a subdued commiseration in Sir Joseph's accent as he made this announcement, such as may occasionally be noticed in the voice of a judge when pronouncing a heavy sentence upon a convicted felon; but Brian did not know Lady Clementina very well, and so missed this touch of humour.

His only desire now was to get away as soon as might be. He shook himself free of Sir Joseph presently and advanced towards Beatrice, who was still deep in conversation with Gilbert, intending to make some excuse to her and retire. Stapleford intercepted him, with as near an approach to an ironical laugh as so good-natured a man could compass.

"You have been enlightened by the virtuous Joseph, I see. Fine spectacle, Joseph, when he gets up on his hind legs. Did he tell you that your brother's conduct was 'distinctly discreditable'?"

"I should not have been inclined to contradict him if he had," answered Brian shortly.

"Oh, no; you would think it discreditable in a man

to break his word under any circumstances; and so it is, for that matter. Only, you know, it isn't exactly that that rouses the righteous indignation of Clementina and her prince consort. I expect, for instance, that they would have found plenty of excuses for me if I had thrown some young woman over for Beatrice's sake."

"You are rather cynical; it seemed to me that he was honestly distressed," said Brian. He added, half-involuntarily and somewhat feebly, "Do you believe that she—that Miss Huntley knows what she is doing?"

Stapleford made a grimace.

"I should say that Beatrice knows as well as most women what she is about. After all, she is a woman; she isn't an angel, though I dare say I may have taken her for one once upon a time."

Apparently Beatrice's assertion that he was in a fair way towards recovery was no vain boast.

Brian passed on to the recess in which she and Gilbert had ensconced themselves.

"I have come to say good night," he announced, when she looked up at him inquiringly; "I am rather busy, as you may imagine, and it is getting late."

She held out her hand, without offering any remonstrance.

"Till to-morrow, then," she said. "We shall be in our places before the overture strikes up, you may be sure. Perhaps you will come and receive our congratulations after the first act."

"Or your condolences," he answered, and nodding to his brother, turned away.

Congratulations or condolences, it mattered little

enough to him now which he might earn. Fortune had done her worst, and he could afford to smile at any future assaults that she might have in store for him.

CHAPTER XV.

"THE KING'S VETO."

THE manager of the Ambiguity Theatre had had a short but singularly lucrative career. He had never shrunk from costly experiments; he had known how to bait his hook with the novelty and variety which are so essential to theatrical success, and he had always triumphantly landed his public. It was therefore safe to predict that a first night at the Ambiguity would be well attended; and, indeed, when Brian, who arrived rather late on the evening announced as "destined to mark the dawn of a new epoch in the annals of dramatic representation," reached the pretty little play-house, he found it thronged from floor to roof. Boxes, stalls, pit, and gallery were alike as full as they could hold; in various parts of the house he noticed friendly and familiar faces; almost immediately opposite to him sat Beatrice, who favoured him with a smiling signal of recognition. Miss Joy was beside her; behind them were Gilbert and Stapleford; and in the background could be discerned the gloomy countenance of Sir Joseph Huntley.

It was from the back of a stage-box, occupied by Phipps and sundry other friends, that the young composer took this survey of his judges. Phipps, who had hurried off to the theatre immediately after a dinner

for which he had had little appetite, and who was looking pale and nervous, hailed him, as usual, with a mixture of admiration and remonstrance.

"Never saw such a fellow in all my born days! Drops in casually at the last moment, as if he had happened to remember that there was a new play on, and thought perhaps it might amuse him to have a look at it. Not particularly keen about being there for the overture, you know; has heard it already, in fact. Well, I'm not bloodthirsty, and as a general thing I shouldn't care to attend an execution; but I should like to see you hung, Segrave, I should really! It would be a sort of apotheosis of the self-satisfied man, total indifference to the words or ways of the rest of creation raised to its highest expression."

Brian did not think it worth while to explain how very little self-satisfaction had to do with his calmness, or how far he was from being indifferent to the words and ways of some of his fellow-creatures. He seated himself close to the door, declining the front place offered to him; at the same moment the conductor of the orchestra raised his *baton*, and conversation was hushed. In truth, he himself was a little surprised that he should feel so cool. His senses were curiously numb; it seemed to him that this evening was the conclusion of a chapter in his life; he wanted to get it over and see what was beyond. The chapter had been a fiasco, and its *finale*, whatever that might be like, could not possibly mend it. Yet he had taken particular pains about this overture, feeling somewhat more of a personal interest in it than in any other portion of the opera. For the overture, at any rate, was all his own;

there was no flavour of Phipps about it, save such as was inseparable from the character of the whole composition. He listened to it now phlegmatically enough, noticing only with a dull kind of satisfaction that the orchestra was doing him full justice; but when it came to an end and there burst out from all quarters of the house a sudden and spontaneous tumult of applause, his heart gave a great bound. He was not such a stoic as he had imagined himself, after all. To hear another man cheered and clapped by an audience some hundreds strong is the commonest thing in the world; there is nothing exciting about it, unless it reaches positively rapturous heights, and even then one's excitement is apt to be tempered by doubts as to whether he has done anything to deserve it. But very different are the sensations of him to whom this uproar is addressed. It may be worth much or it may be worth next to nothing; it may be merited or unmerited; but few indeed are the mortals whose blood does not course wildly through their veins when for the first time the plaudits of an assemblage of their fellow-men fall upon their ears. Readers of Brian Segrave's history will not, surely, be so cruel as to laugh if it must be recorded of him that his inward ejaculation, as the curtain rose upon the first scene of *The King's Veto* was, "I haven't lived altogether in vain, then."

The first act was designed—as perhaps all first acts should be—to put the audience in good humour and stimulate its curiosity. It opened with the coronation of Conrad, King of Democratia, a ceremony which admitted of much magnificence of costume and scenery and gave occasion for the introduction of a stirring

obtained but little gratitude, she made him take the chair directly behind her, turning round so as to face him.

"I am so very, very glad!" she exclaimed. "I knew you would be victorious; but I was a little bit frightened, all the same. Swine, you know, don't appreciate pearls, and when I saw all this crowd I couldn't help being afraid that the swine must be in an alarming majority. I was quite wrong, though. Far be it from me to call them names, after their splendid behaviour! I should like to shake hands with them all round!"

"Oh, but it is too early to talk about victory yet," objected Brian. "Besides, the glory, such as it is, belongs to Phipps. It is really his piece, not mine."

"What absurd nonsense! Mr. Phipps, indeed! A funny little man who writes funny little plays, which, I grant you, are amusing enough in their funny little way, but which nobody out of a lunatic asylum would ever dream of calling works of genius. Don't you see that your music has triumphed in spite of him, not because of him? He was within an ace of making you ridiculous several times, and if he had done that I would never have spoken to him again!"

There was a delicate pink flush upon her cheeks; her clear eyes had an unusual light in them; she seemed to be sincere; and, after all, why should she not be? Brian had never doubted that she liked him and wished him well, nor had her dethronement from that high pedestal upon which his imagination had placed her anything to do with the too flattering estimate which she had been pleased to form of his abilities. Her pre-

sence was sweet to him, and so was her praise, exaggerated though it might be.

"I am glad you like the music," he said simply.

"Of course I like it; nothing could be more charming. Only I don't think you must do this sort of thing again; it was all very well as a stepping-stone. I don't set up to be a competent critic, but from the first I have known that you have genius; even an ignoramus can discern genius." She paused for a moment, and then asked, "Do you remember that evening, ever so long ago, when I slipped into St. Michael's, and you were playing the organ and never knew I was there?"

"Yes," he answered sadly; "I remember it very well, and all that you said. Miss Joy was outside in the churchyard, transferring a flaming sunset into water-colours. Afterwards we met my poor old father."

"Yes, and you made him angry by talking Radicalism. Wasn't it then that I ventured to compare you and your brother to Jacob and Esau? And was I so very far wrong, after all?"

"'Is he not rightly named Jacob? for he hath supplanted me these two times,'" murmured Brian. He spoke involuntarily; but when he looked up and saw her eyes turned questioningly upon him, he coloured a little. Perhaps, though, she did not understand his allusion, for she went on:

"You see!—you see! And now you have embraced Jacob, just as poor Esau did, and you are content to be an outcast, and all is for the best in the best of possible worlds."

Then the curtain rose upon act the second, and she turned quickly to Brian, saying, "Stay where you are;

Jacob has found some friends on the other side of the house; he won't come back while you keep possession of his place."

This was pleasant hearing for Brian. Assuredly she could not be in love with a man of whom she spoke in that tone, and there began to shine upon him the glimmer of a faint hope that he had misjudged her. The threadbare simile of the moth and the candle came into his mind and gave him comfort. There are women who attract men for the simple reason that they cannot help it; it is neither fair nor reasonable to treat attractiveness as a crime. "Haven't I singed my own wings?" thought Brian; "and is she to blame for that?" For to-night, at all events, he would try to forget what Sir Joseph had told him. If he had been worshipping a false goddess during so many months, it was a small matter that he should continue to worship her for a few hours. So he surrendered himself to the delight of sitting close to her, watching the pleasure which she derived from his composition, and of listening to the comments which she threw back to him from time to time over her shoulder.

Now the music of the second act was in no way inferior to that of the first, nor was Beatrice sparing of her panegyrics upon it; yet, as the action of the piece advanced, it became evident that, in spite of her disparaging criticism upon Mr. Phipps, she was a good deal interested in his plot. The scene in which Phyllis was made to renounce the King, notwithstanding his protestations and reproaches, seemed to please her greatly.

"Why, the man is as stupid and unjust as if he

were a fact instead of a fiction!" she exclaimed. And when the same astute maiden was represented as joining the Socialist plot for the assassination of her lover, intending all the time to save him by sacrificing her own life and that of his chief enemy, Miss Huntley abruptly shifted her chair, bringing herself almost face to face with Brian. "So that is your notion of a heroine!" said she triumphantly. "You admit that she is justified in deceiving everybody, and even in compassing the death of a scoundrel. You admit that all is fair in love and in war."

"Oh no, I don't," answered Brian, laughing. "I decline to be responsible for Phipps's morality; and, indeed, I suspect that Miss Phyllis is only setting the decalogue at defiance because the play couldn't be made to work upon any other terms."

Yet he could not help being glad to hear her making what sounded so very like an excuse for herself. If she had been guilty of deception, it was something that she should be persuaded of the integrity of her own motives. Not precisely in that way had he reasoned that night before; but circumstances alter cases. He did not at the moment think it possible that she could be pleading love for Gilbert in extenuation of any treachery that she might have employed towards Kitty Greenwood. Perhaps, if he had been alone with her, he would have ventured to ask her point-blank what her designs were, but such a straightforward course was out of the question with Miss Joy close at hand. Moreover, Sir Joseph and Stapleford had now resumed their places, and were plying him with kind and congratulatory whispers.

During the second *entr'acte* Gilbert reappeared, and then Brian rose. "I think Phipps will want me to go behind with him and say what is civil to all these eminent *artistes* who have been doing so well for us," he remarked. "Besides, I do feel grateful to them."

"But you will come back again, won't you?" asked Beatrice.

"Yes, if you will allow me," he answered, and left the box, carrying away with him a much lighter heart than he had brought.

Phipps was in high good-humour. Brian found him surrounded by a bevy of admiring friends, whose views as to the respective merits of author and composer may not have been identical with those of Miss Huntley; but he disengaged himself at once to clap his colleague on the back.

"Well, old fellow," said he, "you were right to be confident. I suppose you knew your own value better than I did; but I must own that I never anticipated taking the public by storm in this way. We're all right now; and I don't think I'm too sanguine in saying that we may look forward to a six or eight months' run."

An equally hopeful and jubilant spirit reigned behind the scenes, whither Brian presently repaired. Everybody was smiling, for everybody foresaw that *The King's Veto* would provide those engaged in it with bread and butter for some time to come, and there was no one who had not a pleasant word for the young man to whose talents this cheerful prospect was chiefly, if not entirely, due. The manager drank his health in a glass of champagne, and said, with a certain solemnity, "Mr. Segrave, your fortune is made, sir."

Success of all kinds, from winning the battle of Waterloo down to shooting a wood-cock, is enjoyable, and there must be something very wrong with the mental or bodily health of a man who fails to enjoy it. Brian, though not unduly elated (for he was well aware that the writing of such operas as this, whether it led to fortune or not, could never lead to true fame), enjoyed it all the more, perhaps, because his mental health had only just been re-established. He remained chatting with the manager until long after Phipps had returned to the front, and the last act was well advanced; and when, conformably to his promise, he re-entered Miss Huntley's box, the drama which was being enacted on the stage had reached a climax which those who had followed it with interest so far should have found highly exciting.

But, alas! it was only too obvious that Beatrice did not find it so—that her attention was concentrated on the working out of another drama, in which she herself was engaged, and that she was so absorbed by her part as to be unconscious even of Brian's proximity. She had turned her head away from the stage; her eyes were not attracted by the really brilliant and well-contrived representation of a masked ball which was being displayed there, nor her ears by the swinging, melodious waltz music which subsequently achieved so signal a success that barrel-organs are grinding it in all parts of the United Kingdom at this present day. Gilbert, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, was talking eagerly to her, and she seemed to be pleased with what he was saying, for her parted lips were curved into a smile, and every now and again from beneath

her lowered eyelids she shot a glance at him, which was doubtless aimed to reach his heart. Miss Joy was watching her with a comical expression of distress and discomfiture; Stapleford, apparently more amused than indignant, was staring straight before him; in the back of the box Sir Joseph was sleeping as peacefully as if he had been in the House of Commons.

Possibly Brian saw nothing more than he ought to have been prepared to see; possibly there was nothing in Beatrice's present attitude and demeanour inconsistent with that theory of involuntary fascination which he had formulated on her behalf at an earlier period of the evening; but a theory which can be made to fit one set of circumstances decently well often fails altogether to adapt itself to another. Besides, Brian was in love, which is a state of mind very unfavourable to the calm application of theories. "Who is being cheated here?" was his inward comment upon the scene; and there was little consolation in replying, "Everybody." Gilbert might or might not be a dupe, but in any case he was a deceiver, and so, in any case, must Beatrice be.

She caught sight of him by-and-by and said something to him, which he did not hear, after which she began once more to pay attention to the play, which was now almost over. But neither the prolonged applause which followed the fall of the curtain nor the warm felicitations of the friends who sat around him could arouse an echo of gratitude in Brian's sick heart. There was a call for the authors; Phipps, on the opposite side of the house, could be seen bobbing and grinning like a marionette; then Stapleford seized Brian by the shoulders and pushed him forcibly to the front of

the box; and so the whole business came to an end. Our poor hero had passed through a variety of emotions in the course of the evening, but at the finish he found himself very much where he had been at starting, with such added bitterness of spirit as naturally arose from the consciousness of having been fooled.

Beatrice, as she was leaving the box, paused for a moment beside him. "You don't look very triumphant," she remarked.

"Do I not?" returned he. "Perhaps I don't feel so."

She frowned and bit her lip. She seemed to be going to say something, but apparently changed her mind and passed on. On the threshold, however, she halted, stepped quickly back to him—for he had not moved—and said: "I am going away on Thursday; will you come and see me to-morrow?"

"I will call, since you wish it," replied Brian coldly.

"Since I wish it? I should like to say good-bye to you before I leave, certainly: but my happiness is not so bound up in seeing you again that I should care to drag you to Park Lane against your will. What is the matter with you?"

"I will tell you to-morrow, if you like," answered Brian desperately.

She looked him straight in the face, pressing her lips together. "Very well, then," she said; "you will find me at home at five o'clock. I am not afraid of anything that you may have to say to me; but I hope you will think before you speak and remember that there are limits to the privileges of a friend."

With that warning ringing in his ears, he left her and submitted to be borne away by Phipps to a supper-

party, of which the joyousness can hardly be said to have been augmented by his presence.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE PRIVILEGES OF FRIENDSHIP.

WHEN a man or woman says, "I am not afraid," it is courteous to believe the assertion, but safe to conclude that it is made rather with the intention of frightening somebody else than of testifying to the speaker's intrepidity; for courage has no more need to proclaim itself than virtue. Beatrice Huntley did not succeed in frightening Brian, even though he understood her warning to mean that if he presumed too far she would cease to be his friend. On the other hand, she dreaded his visit a good deal more than she would have done, had she been in possession of that priceless blessing, a clear conscience. Her nerves, ordinarily as steady as a rock, gave her no little trouble that day, and, as a natural consequence, were a source of trouble to others. Sir Joseph was driven discomfited from her presence at an early hour and trotted off to his club, convinced that he had better leave the girl to be dealt with by a capable member of her own sex; Phipps, who dropped in complacently after luncheon, ready to accept the compliments which he conceived to be his due, departed, after a very short stay, with mortification writ large upon his features and the recollection of some amazingly unjust and ironical criticisms in his mind; even Miss Joy did not escape scot free, but came in for one or two snubs so sharp that she withdrew to

her bedroom, where, being a foolish and soft-hearted person, she melted into tears.

Having thus created a solitude for herself and given orders that no one was to be admitted, unless Mr. Segrave should call—"Mr. Segrave, remember, not Mr. Gilbert Segrave"—Beatrice spent the afternoon in wandering restlessly about the room, staring out of the window at the dismal, fog-enveloped park, and trying to fix her attention upon books and newspapers, all of which struck her as being equally devoid of the faintest human interest.

Nervousness and irritability are not likely to be lessened by lack of occupation; yet when Brian, punctual to the appointed hour, was shown into Miss Huntley's luxurious sanctum, he was accosted by a lady who turned towards him a countenance wreathed in smiles and, without rising from the low chair in which she was reclining by the fireside, held out her hand to him, saying lazily: "Hasn't it been a horrid day? I haven't stirred from the house and I was just dropping off to sleep. How nice of you to come in and wake me up!"

"You asked me to come," returned Brian curtly.

"Did I? Oh, yes, I remember; and didn't we have something very like the beginning of a quarrel last night? You were rude, or I thought you were, and as we couldn't very well wrangle in public, we agreed to fight it out afterwards. Well, suppose, on second thoughts, we don't fight it out? Suppose we conclude peace, instead? I never can screw myself up to the point of quarrelling in cold blood."

But this system of tactics was of little avail with a man who was very much in earnest, who had thought

over what he had to say and who meant to say it. "Why do you try to put me off?" Brian asked. "Is it because you don't want to quarrel with me, and because, as you told me last night, a friend must not strain his privileges farther than they will go? But it seems to me that I should be a poor sort of friend if I held my tongue now, rather than run the risk of displeasing you. I think, when you asked what was the matter with me, you could have answered the question for yourself; I think you must know that, however dull I may be, I am not quite blind. And even if I were, there are plenty of people able and willing to open my eyes——"

"Stop a moment," she interrupted. "I will allow, if you like, that a friend is sometimes entitled to ask for explanations; but then he must have shown himself worthy of them. For my own part, I should never think it worth while to explain myself to any one who could not trust me. One knows how that sort of thing always ends. You may satisfy him to-day, but he will be dissatisfied again to-morrow; and so it goes on until, some fine morning, you find that your stock of patience is exhausted. I prefer to anticipate a foregone conclusion."

"I don't think I am the kind of friend that you describe," said Brian; "I am not given to being distrustful; but I won't deny that I distrust you now. After that, you can answer me or not, as you think best; but it isn't a great deal that I ask of you. If you will simply tell me that all this is untrue, that shall be enough—though, of course, I had rather that you told me a little more."

"Your moderation does you credit; only you are not quite as lucid as you might be. What is it that I am to admit or deny?"

"I thought, perhaps, you would not force me to put such a hateful question into words. Is it true or untrue that you are trying to induce Gilbert to break off his engagement?"

"And if it were true?"

Brian hesitated. "I won't believe it!" he exclaimed. "I won't believe until you admit it."

"Depart in peace, then; I haven't made the admission."

But this was scarcely satisfactory. "Won't you just say that it is untrue?" pleaded Brian.

"No; why should I? I don't recognise your right to drive me into a corner and hold a pistol to my head."

"What pistol? I have nothing to threaten you with; for I suppose it can't matter much to you whether I am able to go on thinking of you as I have always thought or not; but it matters everything to me. I can't go away without any answer at all and calmly hold my judgment in suspense until I see what will happen."

"Why not? It seems to me that that would be a very correct and sensible attitude to take up. Why can't you adopt it?"

"Because I love you!" he burst out suddenly. "I have loved you ever since the first day that we met, I think; though I have never had any hope, except for a short time long ago, when I didn't quite understand what a great gulf was fixed between us. I understand that perfectly well now, and besides, my chance would

have been no better if I had been an important personage, instead of an insignificant one. Through all your kindness to me you have never given me the slightest excuse for supposing that you could care for me in that way. I didn't want to tell you this; but I thought——”

He paused and glanced appealingly at her, but she only made a slight movement of her head, as if inviting him to go on.

“Well, I thought that if you knew the truth you would not wish me to have the misery of doubting you when you could remove all my doubts with a word.”

“But are you sure that I can?” she asked in a low voice.

The room was quite dark now, except for the fire-light, and she had drawn her chair back, so that he could not see her face. There was a short interval of silence, after which she resumed: “I won't pretend to be surprised at what you have told me; I have sometimes thought that it might be so, although I was not certain. I am glad you don't accuse me of having led you on, as Stapleford and others have accused me, and I am sorry if you have ever been made unhappy through me. But this is what I think about it: you are dreamy and imaginative; you would be sure to take any woman that you fell in love with for a paragon, and women are not paragons. At all events, most of them are not, and I belong to the majority. You will have been dreadfully disappointed in me if—if——”

“No, I should not!” interrupted Brian, eagerly. “I know you have faults, like everybody else; I could even mention some of them.”

She laughed a little. "Could you? But you don't seem to be very tolerant of them; and, you see, you are ready to suspect me of all kinds of iniquity. That comes of setting up too high an ideal."

"You call it iniquity, then," he cried; "you allow that it would be iniquity. That is all I wanted you to say. No, Miss Huntley, I haven't set up too high an ideal. I don't know that I can explain myself; but in my own mind it is quite clear that it wasn't really you whom I suspected. If this thing had been true—and there was a great deal to make me think it so—the evidence of my own senses, besides what Sir Joseph told me, and Stapleford—if it had been true you wouldn't have been yourself; you would have been a deceitful, heartless woman, who, for the sake of vanity or ambition, or perhaps of something that she might dignify by the name of love, did not hesitate to betray her friend and disgrace herself. You see," he concluded with a sort of laugh, "it couldn't have been you whom I suspected."

"Ah," she said, "you couldn't love a woman of that description."

"No, I think not; I hope not. Certainly I should be ashamed of myself if I did."

"Come!" said Beatrice, rising and standing over him, with one hand resting upon the mantelpiece, "you have paid me a compliment—for I suppose it is a compliment to a woman to fall in love with her, even though that sentiment may be grounded upon an illusion—and the least that I can do in return is to restore you to a healthy state of mind. Joseph and Stapleford and the evidence of your own senses have not misled

you; I have done and am doing my best to break off the engagement between your brother and Kitty Greenwood. More than that, I believe that I have as good as succeeded. More than that, I am utterly unrepentant, and I would do it all over again. I hope that is explicit enough to satisfy you."

There was a long pause. Brian also had risen to his feet, and was standing close to her, but he made no reply.

At last she asked abruptly, "Well, have you nothing to say to me?"

"Nothing," he answered quietly. "Nothing, either now or at any future time."

"This is to be final, then? If we meet again we are to cut one another dead?"

"No; not unless you desire it. I take it that you will become my sister-in-law, and in that case it would be better that we should be upon speaking terms, wouldn't it?"

"You foresee everything. Yes, no doubt it would be more convenient that we should remain upon speaking terms, supposing that you will condescend so far as to speak to me. You have been nicely deceived in me, have you not?"

"I have only myself to blame for that," he replied gravely.

"What magnanimity! I should have thought that you would prefer to condemn me; that seems to be such a natural and easy process with you. But, after all, one readily pardons a person whom one despises."

By way of reply he took up his hat and bowed.

"Good-bye," she said, ringing the bell. And so they parted, without shaking hands.

When Beatrice was left alone she went to her davenport, unlocked it, and took out a photograph, which she had purchased nearly a year before from a Kingscliff artist. It represented Brian Segrave, seated in a very uncomfortable attitude, upon a sharp rock, behind which was a nebulous background, traversed horizontally by some white, woolly appearances, which, when you were told of it, you perceived to be the waves of the sea. Hung upside down they did duty for the clouds in a summer sky, and had figured in one or the other capacity behind the backs of most of the leading inhabitants of Kingscliff. Beatrice gazed steadily at this work of art for several minutes before she tossed it into the fire, and pressed it down with the poker among the glowing coals until it was consumed. Then, with lips compressed and her chin in the air, she left the room and, mounting the staircase, knocked at Miss Joy's door.

"Dear old Matilda," she said on being admitted, "I have come to beg your pardon. I was cross and rude to you to-day, and I am afraid I distressed you."

Miss Joy jumped up and flung her arms round the girl's neck. "No, no!" she exclaimed; "it was I who was too ready to take offence. But, Beatrice dear, I have been so unhappy—so worried!"

"Worried about what, you old goose? But I know, and I don't want you to tell me. Matilda, *you* won't throw me over, will you, come what may?"

"Never!" cried Miss Joy emphatically. "I don't always understand you, my dear, and I don't always think you in the right; but, right or wrong, I always love you, and always shall."

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“Ah, Matilda, that is a very foolish and immoral kind of friendship. When you think a friend in the wrong you ought to pull a long face and straighten your backbone and say, ‘I have been deceived in you, but I do not reproach you. Farewell!’ However, I think I like the foolish and immoral friends best. Matilda, what should you say to going up the Nile?”

“My dear child, would it be safe? And—and would it fit in with your plans?”

“I have no plans; and I think we should be sufficiently protected by Mr. Cook and the British army of occupation. Still, Algiers or Madeira or Cyprus would suit me equally well. We will wait to see the result of the general election, Matilda, and then we will be off. How glad I shall be to say good-bye to my friends!—to the wise and moral ones, I mean.”

CHAPTER XVII.

GILBERT IS QUITE SUCCESSFUL.

To have bestowed the warmest affections of one's heart upon an unworthy object is, beyond doubt, a great calamity. It is true that, after a certain time of life, we are not inclined to view such mishaps in a very serious light; we are apt to smile indulgently, but a trifle ironically, at those who bewail themselves over a blighted love affair, because we know that so many worse things than that may befall the pilgrim through this vale of tears. He may, for example, be cursed with a disorganised liver, which is a thing far less amenable to treatment than a broken heart; or he may, through some taint of hereditary sin, be an Irish land-

lord; or he may, for the matter of that, have been successful in his wooing and married the woman of his choice, with consequences altogether unforeseen by him when he gaily bade farewell to celibacy. In fact, there is no end to the incurable ills which flesh is heir to, whereas it has been admitted on all hands since the world began that love-troubles, though sharp for a time, are by no means incurable. But wisdom of this kind comes only by experience; and until the age of thirty or thereabouts (which is as much as to say during the better, and by far the longer half of life), few men or women attain to it. And since an affliction is heavy or light simply and solely in proportion as it is felt to be the one or the other by the person afflicted, it must be allowed that Brian Segrave, after hearing Beatrice's confession, had every right to consider himself a most unhappy mortal.

That right would, at any rate, have been conceded to him by Kitty Greenwood, who at the same time was thinking the same thing of herself for very much the same reason. Yet she was not, in truth, quite as unhappy as he, because the discovery that she had been deceived in the object of her adoration had a very different effect upon her from that which a similar discovery had produced upon him. She might have forgiven Gilbert for deserting her; she might have loved him still, or fancied that she loved him still, after his heart had been given to another woman; but when she saw plainly that he was not only ready to sacrifice her for the sake of material advantages but determined to cover his retreat by forcing her to accept the responsibility of breaking off their engagement, her

love for him died at once and for ever. The man's whole character was revealed to her by that final touch of baseness, and her first feeling was rather one of thankfulness for her deliverance than of anger against him. She was, however, very angry with Beatrice; and that she did not at once give him the dismissal which he almost asked for at Halcombe was due partly to a not unnatural reluctance to make her rival's path smooth, and partly to a reason which many people might think far-fetched, but which had a certain weight with one whose conscience was sensitive and schooled to the examination of nice points. If—as was evidently the case—Gilbert had been led astray by an unscrupulous flirt, might it not be her duty to withhold his release until he positively demanded it? If she possessed any influence for good upon him, ought she not to exercise it and rescue him, perhaps, from a temptation which had not yet quite got the victory over him? He had certainly been fascinated once before by Beatrice and had shaken off the fascination.

Mrs. Greenwood would have been justifiably incensed against the sacerdotalism which she had often decried, had she known what was passing through Kitty's mind, and that it was not to her but to Mr. Monckton that her daughter looked for a solution of this somewhat fantastic problem. But she heard nothing about it, and Kitty's application to her spiritual director was made without any previous sanction from the home authorities. In fact, the girl knew very well that her parents, kind and good as they were, could not possibly make up her mind for her, whereas she thought that Monckton could. She was a little sur-

prised when, after listening patiently to all that she had to tell him, he answered without a moment's hesitation:—

“It is as simple a case as I ever heard in my life. Send him about his business; you are well rid of a worthless fellow.”

Nor did he give her all the credit that she had expected for her willingness to snatch a brand from the burning. “It can't be anybody's duty to marry a man against his will and her own,” he said, with a slight smile. “All you have to ask yourself is whether you can love and respect him; and if you can't, of course, you must tell him that your engagement is at an end.”

“Yes,” agreed Kitty dubiously, while the tears forced their way into her eyes; “but—but then I shall have to bear the whole blame, and mamma is sure to be very much displeased with me, and—and——”

“Yes?” said Monckton.

“And oh, Mr. Monckton, it is rather hard that Beatrice Huntley should get all she wants and not even be made to feel ashamed of herself!”

“I think I may undertake to make your peace with Mrs. Greenwood; she isn't a very implacable person, is she? And as for Miss Huntley—well, I don't know exactly what Miss Huntley's aims and objects may be; she has avoided me for a long time past.”

“Because she hasn't dared to speak to you?”

“Well, if so, I suppose she is a little ashamed of herself already; and though her punishment is no business of yours, it is pretty sure to overtake her, I think. If she marries Gilbert Segrave that will be punishment

enough in all conscience; and if she doesn't—why, then the Manor House won't be a very pleasant place of residence for her."

"What difference will that make to her? She has plenty of money; she will only go off somewhere else, after doing all this mischief here."

"It has been a beneficent kind of mischief, so far as you are concerned. Indeed, I can't pity you, for you have nothing to accuse yourself of, and most certainly nothing to regret. Besides, I doubt whether you would thank me for pitying you."

This timely appeal to Kitty's pride was not without effect. It was quite true that she did not want to be pitied; nor, as she walked home, did she feel that her plight was a very pitiable one after all. She could not all at once recover her spirits, but every morning when she awoke she was conscious of a sense of relief, as though some great weight had been removed from her mind, and so by degrees she began to understand that her love for Gilbert had not for some time past been as real as she had imagined it.

One afternoon she descried him riding up to the house and went to the door to meet him, as she had been wont. Her pulse was a trifle unsteady, but she felt neither angry nor miserable, only anxious to get the coming ordeal over as quickly as might be. As he drew nearer the sight of his trim figure and well-cut features gave her a strange sensation of repulsion; there was no doubt about it, he had become hateful to her. He raised his hat on recognising her, cantered past to the stable-yard, and presently returned on foot. Their meetings hitherto had been such as are customary

between lovers, although their conversations had not always been lover-like; but now, when he approached her, she drew back, saying:—

“Will you come into the library, please? I have something to tell you.”

This was very much what he had been prepared for. He followed her, assuming a seriousness of demeanour suitable to the occasion, and the moment that he had closed the door she began:

“I have been thinking about what you said to me before you went to London, and I see that you were right. It would be impossible for us to live together happily.”

“If you think so,” answered Gilbert, in grave, subdued accents, “no doubt it is so. I can only bow to your decision.”

Nothing in his face or his voice betrayed any inward satisfaction that he may have felt. He looked like one who has had hard measure dealt out to him, but who respects himself too much to complain of it. Kitty had made up her mind to let him march off with the honours of war, since he coveted them; but she was a little bit provoked all the same.

“I suppose,” she remarked, “that you think so too.”

“I am afraid that, if I am to be truthful, I must answer yes. It seems to me that in many ways—especially with regard to religious questions—our notions of life and duty are diametrically opposed; and I ought not, perhaps, to expect that you should yield to me in such matters. I shall neither have time nor, frankly speaking, inclination, to go to church on week-days;

nor, if we were married, would you be able to take your place in society and go on devoting yourself to ecclesiastical exercises. I can't help admitting that these are sufficient reasons to justify you in putting an end to our engagement."

"I dare say they might be; but they are not the real reasons, and I think you should be told what my real reason is. It is simply what you said the other day—that I find you are not what I took you for, and that—I don't love you."

Probably it was not altogether disagreeable to Kitty to make this unequivocal statement; certainly it was not altogether agreeable to Gilbert to hear it. He had an abundance of phrases ready, designed to prove to her in the kindest and most delicate way that, although she might still love him, it was expedient that she should renounce him; but he was not prepared, upon the spur of the moment, to show cause why she should still love him, although she renounced him; and, doubtless, that accounted for his blurting out the clumsy rejoinder of—

"It has taken you some time to make this discovery."

"No," she answered simply; "it did not take me long—scarcely a minute, I think. I knew it really before you had finished speaking to me that day at Halcombe."

"Indeed! Then I am surprised that you did not say so at once."

"I thought it better to do as you advised, and take a few days to think it over in. It seemed to me that there was no immediate hurry."

"None whatever. When one has a cruel thing to say, one can always make it doubly effective by saying it deliberately."

"Yes; that is just what I felt about the words that you used to me at Halcombe. They were not hasty words, and I could not go on deceiving myself after them."

Gilbert winced. For weeks he had been doing all that in him lay to bring about this result; yet, now that he had arrived at it, he did not half like it. So painful was it to him to be despised, and so far was he from sharing Kitty's conviction that their old love was dead and gone, that she might, if she had wished it, have won him back to his allegiance even at this eleventh hour. Happily, she had no such desire; for it is certain that he would have repented of his weakness immediately after giving way to it.

"You have not one spark of love left for me, then!" he exclaimed.

She shook her head.

"As little as you have for me," she replied. "I think we understand each other," she added presently in a low voice, "and there is no occasion to say anything more."

Well, really this was very amazing. Gilbert had always been accustomed to regard Kitty as a dear, good little soul, with no brains to speak of and a nature so guileless that any child might get the better of her. Yet here she was making a man of the world look utterly mean and foolish, showing him plainly that she could read to the bottom of his heart and refraining from entering into particulars with a disdainful magna-

nimity which made his position quite untenable. There was nothing left for him to do but to evacuate it without loss of time. To do so gracefully was impossible; but notwithstanding his humiliation and embarrassment, he remembered how important it was that there should be no public misapprehension of the causes which had led to this rupture; so he said hesitatingly—

“I think, for both our sakes, it will be better to make your parents and—and everybody understand that we part because—because—in short, because you have changed your mind about me.”

“You will not be blamed,” she answered briefly; “I shall tell them nothing more nor less than the truth—that I am convinced that I do not care enough about you to marry you.”

Then he mumbled a few words of farewell and got out of the room somehow.

A man who proposes to act disgracefully should make sure beforehand that he is of sufficiently tough fibre to endure contempt. Gilbert, unluckily for himself, was not so constituted, and he rode away from Morden Court in anything but a jubilant mood. He had been very successful, for he had not only regained his liberty but had had it thrust upon him, and had been assured that nothing of a nature to cast discredit upon him would be revealed to the neighbourhood; yet he was made miserable by the consciousness that there was one person in the world who knew him for what he was. He almost doubted whether the game was worth the candle. So morbid was his sensitiveness that to incur the disdain of a single insignificant young woman seemed to him, for the moment, too heavy a price to

pay for wealth, fame, and gratified ambition. Moreover, he could not feel quite sure of her. Women are proverbially bad hands at keeping a secret; she might let out the truth any day to Monckton, for instance; it dawned upon him that for a long time, perhaps for years to come, his reputation would be in a measure at her mercy. If, at least, she would hold her peace until after the election! But even that did not seem certain.

About the last man in the world whom he would have wished to meet, while under the influence of these despondent forebodings, was Admiral Greenwood; but it was the Admiral's thickset figure which loomed suddenly up in the twilight as he was unfastening the park-gate, and it was the Admiral's jovial voice which called out—

“Hullo, Gilbert! Back from London, eh? Well, what news of Brian's opera? I suppose you have been giving Kitty a full, true, and particular account of the whole thing. Why she didn't go up with you *I* can't make out; but women are full of fads and caprices—even the best of 'em—though I don't say so to Mrs. Greenwood. *Varium et mutabile*, you know.”

Gilbert perceived at once that the Admiral must be enlightened. The necessity was a painful one; but it would be very unwise to shirk it; so he said in a grave, sad voice—

“I have only too good reason to know it. I am sorry to tell you that all is over between your daughter and me.”

“What!” roared the Admiral. And then—for, albeit a pious man, he had spent the greater part of his life in the Royal Navy—he proceeded to relieve

his feelings after the fashion customary among sailors, while Gilbert sat silent on his horse, the picture of dignified resignation.

"God forgive me for swearing!" ejaculated the Admiral, after pausing a moment to take breath; but this is really preposterous. Come, come; we mustn't make mountains out of molehills. Lovers' quarrels—kiss and make it up again, eh? Now, Gilbert, you just come straight back to the house with me, and we'll set this all right in a jiffy."

But Gilbert made a melancholy gesture of dissent.

"You don't understand," said he mildly. "There has been no quarrel; but Miss Greenwood has told me in so many words that she does not care enough for me to become my wife."

"I don't believe it," exclaimed the Admiral.

Gilbert gathered up his reins. "Of course," he remarked, "I can't compel you to accept my word."

The Admiral did not appear to be much impressed by this lofty rebuke. "Stop a bit, my young friend," returned he; "you're asking me, let me remind you, to believe that my girl is a jilt, and I shall want better security than your word before I'll sit down under an accusation of that kind. I may be wrong—and if I am I'll beg your pardon—but it strikes me very forcibly that I haven't heard the rights of this affair yet. One thing I can tell you: no man shall play fast and loose with my daughter; and if I find that is what you've been doing, so sure as I stand here, I'll thrash you first and make the place too hot to hold you afterwards."

The truth was that the Admiral had never been able to conquer his distrust of his prospective son-in-

law, and although none of the rumours which had been flying about Kingscliff had reached his ears, he had an intuitive conviction that this catastrophe was none of Kitty's creating.

"I am sorry," said Gilbert, "that you should think fit to express yourself so intemperately. I can only refer you to Miss Greenwood, and hope that, when you have seen her, you will feel that you owe me an apology. Good night."

Thereupon he turned and went his way, with an outward composure which concealed much inward perturbation. The Admiral's threat of thrashing him was, of course, all nonsense; the difference in their ages rendered anything in the shape of a personal encounter between them impossible. But that the place might easily be made too hot to hold him he did not doubt. "What a thundering idiot I was to speak to the man at all!" he muttered. "It would have been so simple to be overcome by my emotions and to ride on, without answering, when he hailed me."

All his previous misgivings were swept away by the thought of this new danger. Everything now depended upon whether Kitty chose to stand to her guns or not, and really there was no reason why she should brave the wrath of a choleric father in order to shield a false lover. Nevertheless, Gilbert saw that, if the worst came to the worst, he could make out a tolerably plausible case for himself. She might bring charges against him, but she could hardly prove them; and the fact remained that he had given the Admiral a strictly truthful version of their rupture. It was Kitty and not he who had put an end to the engagement, and she had done so

on the specific ground that she no longer loved him. The most determined suitor in the world could only retire after such a declaration as that.

As he rode through Kingscliff it occurred to him that it might be prudent to forestall rumour and provide the gossips with an authorised account of what must in any event become the subject of eager discussion before the next twenty-four hours were over. There was a small club in the place, which at that season of the year was always thronged with loungers between five and seven o'clock. Thither he betook himself, and leaving his horse in charge of a boy at the door, went up-stairs to the billiard-room, where, as he had expected, he found half-a-dozen men playing pool and another half-dozen or so looking on.

One of them, Johnson by name, immediately accosted him with, "Well, Segrave, you look very down in the mouth. Radical prospects not quite so bright as they were, are they?"

This Johnson, a major on half-pay, a frequenter of tea-parties, a steward of local balls, and an inveterate retailer of local scandals, was just the man for Gilbert's purpose. He was, of course, a Conservative—for who ever heard of a Radical half-pay major?—but he liked to be upon good terms with the landed proprietors of the neighbourhood, and affected a certain intimacy with the owner of Beckton while deploring his political apostasy.

"I know nothing about our prospects," Gilbert answered, "nor, so far as I can see, does anybody else. If I look down in the mouth, I suppose it is because I have private worries of my own."

"Ah!" said Johnson inquisitively. "Well, we all have worries enough, goodness knows—health, or money, or women; the three roots of all evil, as I say. Hope your trouble isn't connected with any of them. Excuse me, my dear fellow, I really didn't mean to question you. Sounded as if I did, I'm afraid."

"Oh," answered Gilbert, with a sigh. "I don't mind being questioned. Indeed, I may as well tell you at once what everybody will know before long. My engagement is off, that's all."

"You don't say so! Really and finally off, is it? Dear, dear, dear! Well, Segrave, I'm sincerely sorry for this."

Gilbert gravely thanked his sympathising friend. "I hope you understand," he added, "that I make no complaint against Miss Greenwood. You, who know women so much better than I do, must be aware that they often change their minds."

"Yes, yes! very true," agreed Major Johnson, with a sapient air. "And so she has actually thrown you over. Did she—if I may ask—give any reasons?"

Gilbert shrugged his shoulders. "In such cases it is hardly generous to press for reasons," he remarked. "I have always been a Broad Churchman; perhaps that may have had something to do with it."

He moved away, as if he did not care to pursue the subject further; and after gloomily watching the players for another ten minutes and exchanging a few words with some of them, left the room.

His tactics would have been admirable but for the fact—of which he was as ignorant as Admiral Greenwood—that his attentions to Miss Huntley had been the common talk of Kingscliff during the preceding

three weeks. Thus it was that everybody in the club was speedily informed of how "that fellow Segrave" had given poor little Miss Greenwood the slip.

"Had it from his own lips," Major Johnson declared, swelling with satisfaction. "He tried to make out that she had thrown him over; because he isn't a Ritualist, too; as if I should believe such a cock-and-bull story as that! I told you how it would be. Now, didn't I tell you fellows from the first how it would be? I should have warned poor old Greenwood, only I hate to interfere with other people's business. And a most infernal shame it is, upon my word! That young Segrave," continued the Major, wagging his head solemnly—"well, his father was a friend of mine, and he is pleased to consult me pretty frequently, and perhaps I ought not to speak against him. But if I am asked my opinion of him, why, I must give it candidly."

"I'm sure you're always ready to give a candid opinion of any of your friends, Johnny," remarked a younger member of the club.

"Yes, sir," replied the Major, drawing himself up. "I am not given to disguising my opinions, and what I say behind a man's back I say to his face. Well, well, I suppose the next thing we shall hear will be that he has landed the heiress."

CHAPTER XVIII.

GILBERT'S TRUMP CARD.

ON the ensuing morning Gilbert received an apology from the Admiral which was more apologetic in matter than in manner.

"I cannot see my way," the old gentleman wrote, with touching simplicity, "to avoid asking your pardon; for I find that your account of what still seems to me an unaccountable business was substantially correct. I beg, therefore, to withdraw any offensive expressions which I may have used to you. As it has been suggested to me that you may be under some apprehension of losing my vote at the coming election, I take this opportunity of stating that I shall vote, as heretofore, with the party to which I have belonged all my life, little as I admire some of its measures and a good many of its members."

This was not precisely a message of peace; but it came as an immense relief to Gilbert, who had been in trembling expectation of a declaration of war. The Admiral might, and probably did, smell a rat; but pride would keep his lips closed, while the authorised and authoritative Johnson might be trusted to put the gossips to silence. Gilbert avoided the town during the next few days; otherwise he might possibly have detected signs of a rising wave of hostile public opinion. As it was, the first intimation of its existence was conveyed to him through the medium of the local newspaper, which reported at full length a speech delivered by the Conservative candidate to a crowded meeting of the electors.

Mr. Giles, as usual, was very funny. The patient cow trotted forth at his bidding and disported herself in many a humorous metaphor; the assumed determination of the new voters to possess themselves of three acres of land apiece was declared to be not inconsistent with the insatiability of a political body which could not be contented with less than three leaders.

"We, gentlemen, as you know, have been politely called the stupid party; and perhaps it is owing to our stupidity that we can understand a man agreeing with Mr. Gladstone, or Mr. Chamberlain, or Lord Hartington, but have a difficulty in realising the mental process by which he can bring himself to agree with them all at once. We cannot help thinking that before long he will have to choose one or other of these statesmen, and fearing that that one will refuse to hand him over even a single poor acre of his neighbour's property."

But it was when Mr. Giles withdrew from the general struggle to fight his own little battle that, according to the newspaper, he carried his audience triumphantly along with him; and the newspapers added that in that audience there was a considerable contingent of Radicals. "My friend and adversary Mr. Segrave," the orator was reported to have observed, "has become curiously cautious of late. I search through his eloquent speeches in vain for cows and acres; I find no more allusions to free education; he seems to have clean forgotten that a month or two ago the Church establishment was doomed. Now, I will not accuse my friend of hedging; but I will venture to hazard the conjecture that he has selected his leader, and that the leader in question does not hail from Birmingham. No; I think the leader in question would be found a little north of Birmingham and not quite so far north as Midlothian. I haven't a word to say against that selection, which may or may not be a prudent one; but I can't help wondering in my stupid Conservative way, how we are to reconcile it with Mr. Segrave's earlier and more distinct utterances. We know, be-

cause he has told us so, that he is in favour of very sweeping measures indeed—and Brutus is an honourable man (laughter). We know—for is it not recorded in the pages of that admirably edited journal, the *Kingscliff Chronicle*?—that no longer ago than the month of August last he was firmly convinced that every civilised state is as much bound to provide its humblest citizens with instruction as with food—and Brutus is an honourable man (laughter). We know—we cannot doubt it, since we have his own authority to rely upon—that a Bill for the payment of members of Parliament would have his hearty support—and Brutus is an honourable man (great laughter).

The speaker appeared to have continued in this strain for something like a quarter of an hour. There is no more tedious reading in the world than the facetious attacks of an opponent. It is impossible to see anything amusing in them, it is extremely hard to comprehend why any one should find them so, and often—as in the present instance—they appear to be absolutely pointless. What point was there in repeating “Brutus is an honourable man” at the end of every sentence? And what was there in that inane reiteration to excite “great laughter”? Gilbert found out when he turned over the page and read Mr. Giles’s summing up of that branch of his subject.

“Well, gentlemen, these things are mysterious to us; for we are only stupid Conservatives, and, like the stupid man in the fable, we find it strange that the same mouth should be able to blow hot and cold. But we may rest assured that a satisfactory explanation will be forthcoming in due time. It cannot be otherwise;

because nothing is more clear than that Mr. Segrave is pledged to the extreme Radical programme, and although I cannot pretend to an intimate personal acquaintance with my distinguished rival, yet, from all that I hear of him, I feel convinced that he would be the last man in the world—quite the last man in the world—to break an engagement of any kind” (roars of laughter).

This was very disagreeable, and most ungentleman-like conduct it was on the part of Giles to give a private and personal character to a political controversy. Such allusions are just what tend more than anything else to degrade public life and to deter respectable persons from entering upon it. However, Gilbert could have pardoned him his allusion if only it had not been received with roars of laughter. The echo of that significant hilarity resounded in the culprit's ears and made him feel that his position was a ticklish one. He had been assured—and he believed it—that he could not afford to lose a hundred or even fifty votes; he knew that the laughter of mobs is often and easily converted into hooting, and he very much feared that his chances might be placed in serious jeopardy by innuendos to which he dared not make any reply. His conclusion was that the sooner he could produce his trump card the better it would be for him.

Now, this playing of the trump card would not, of course, be in all respects pleasant. His friends and the Greenwoods' friends would be a little shocked and a little disgusted to hear that so very soon after receiving his *congé* from Kitty he had engaged himself to another woman. Yet he would not be quite the first man who has astonished his neighbours in that way;

they might, if they were disposed to be charitable, attribute his apparent heartlessness to a fit of pique or despair; their bitterest sarcasms would doubtless be reserved, as they always are in such cases, for the lady. And, at any rate, their disapprobation must be risked. The main thing was to be able to tell Buswell that the Manor House would soon be in his hands, and to make the electors understand that by rejecting him they would reject a man of great wealth; which wealth would assuredly be lavished upon another constituency if they allowed it to slip through their fingers. He was strongly of opinion that these practical considerations would prove more persuasive than the satire of Mr. Giles or the outraged propriety of a few old frumps and fogeys. That he held the trump card in his hand he would not allow himself to doubt. Beatrice Huntley, if he knew anything of her character, was not the woman to encourage any one as she had encouraged him without being prepared to go all lengths; nor was she the woman to be diverted from her purpose by fear of censorious tongues. Indeed, he had often envied her superb indifference to what might be said or thought about her. Still he was nervous and desperately eager to be put out of suspense. Beatrice had told him that she would stay a week and no longer at her brother's house; but it was quite possible that she might change her mind, and time was of the greatest importance. What if, after all, she were to delay her return until it should be too late?

He would not have felt much fear on that score if he had known how very unpleasant Miss Huntley's visit was being made for her by her sister-in-law. It was with

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feelings of the most unfeigned joy that Beatrice, having stood firm against all Lady Clementina's supplications, threats, and denunciations, and having refused Stapleford for the second time, seated herself in the train which was to convey her back to Kingscliff. She had been victorious, but her victory had not been easily won; and Gilbert, who called upon her on the following afternoon, was startled by her worn and jaded appearance.

"You don't look at all well," he could not help saying.

"I don't feel well," she replied shortly; "I have been worried to death. Deservedly worried too, which makes it all the worse."

"I don't know why or by whom you have been worried; but I am quite sure that you have not deserved it," Gilbert declared.

"Are you? I can't think why you should be; but it doesn't much matter. Now that I look at you, you also show traces of care. Has the world been treating you ill since we parted?"

"I suppose most people would think so," answered Gilbert; "but, somehow or other, I hardly imagine that you will. You never considered my engagement a wise one, did you?"

"Never. And latterly I have observed symptoms of your having come round to my view. Have you broken it off, then?"

"It has been broken off. Not by me, though, I am glad to say. Even after I knew that I had made a great mistake I felt that it would be quite impossible for me to release myself; but to you I won't pretend that I am not heartily rejoiced at my release. Indeed it is a happy release for her too."

"I should rather think it was! Excuse me if I am unflattering; but really I can't help agreeing with you."

"I don't think that is unflattering," said Gilbert; "it is the truth. It was neither her fault or mine that we could not be happy together. Only I am very sorry that we did not recognise facts a little sooner. When I look back upon it all I am amazed at my—my—"

"Yes? What is it that you are amazed at? Your patience, perhaps?"

"Oh, no; I was bound to be patient, under the circumstances. I was going to say at my madness. Surely a man must be crazy if he imagines himself in love with one woman while all the time he is really in love with another."

"Quite fit for a padded cell, I should say. And can it be that that is actually your lamentable case?"

"Don't laugh at me," pleaded Gilbert reproachfully; "this is no laughing matter for me, whatever it may be for you. And I am sure you know, and have known for a long time, that that is my case. Sometimes I think that I may have feared my fate too much. When I first met you—well, it wasn't very strange that I should regard you as being far above my reach, was it? Now that I am better acquainted with you, I see that you don't value yourself, as most women in your place would, for your money or even for your beauty. I now know that you would never think of saying to yourself, 'I am entitled to marry a man of the highest position, and therefore I shall be satisfied with nothing short of that.' But I could not very well know it then, could I?"

"I forgive you for having taken my measure by

too low a standard," said Beatrice gravely; "it was only natural."

"It was natural, at all events, that I should be extremely reluctant to admit to myself that I had done so foolish a thing as to fall in love with you. I persuaded myself that all I felt for you was admiration, and afterwards friendship—when you seemed willing to allow me that privilege. So things went on until last summer, in London, when I left you so suddenly—do you remember?—and in a sort of panic proposed to Miss Greenwood and was accepted. It was a conclusive way of proving to myself that I did not love you."

Beatrice was bending over the fire, resting one elbow on her knee and shielding her face from the blaze with a large feather handscreen. "Oh," she said, without changing her attitude or looking at Gilbert; "that was why you proposed to Kitty Greenwood, was it?"

"Yes," he answered unblushingly; "that was why. It was wrong, perhaps, and certainly it was foolish; but I have repented of it, and I am ashamed of it."

He rose and drew nearer to her. "Do you forgive me, Beatrice?" he asked; and as he spoke he took her left hand, which was lying on the arm of her chair.

She drew it away; but without apparent displeasure. Indeed she was not under the influence of any emotion at all that he could detect; and it was in a perfectly cool, matter-of-fact voice that she asked: "What is it that you are ashamed of?"

"Why, I have told you," he answered; "I am ashamed of having all but married a girl whom I did not love."

"Oh, I think not. I don't see how you can be ashamed of that; because, you see, that is an offence of which you haven't been guilty. If you feel ashamed—but are you sure that you do?—surely it must be of having forsaken a girl whom you really did love when you asked her to marry you, and whom I suppose that you really love still—in your peculiar fashion."

For a moment Gilbert was horribly frightened; but, remembering that it would be quite characteristic of Beatrice to torment him a little before owning herself vanquished, he took heart of grace.

"You don't mean what you say," was his rejoinder.

"I assure you I do; and between ourselves, isn't it the truth! Come, Mr. Segrave, we are alone, and there is no reason in the world why we should not be quite open with each other. I intend, at least, to be quite open with you, and, to set you more at your ease, I may as well tell you at once that you are in no way a mystery to me. You were, and, as I said just now, I believe you still are, as much in love with Kitty Greenwood as you are capable of being in love with any one; you hesitated a long time about proposing to her, because you are gifted with immense prudence, and your hesitation naturally increased when it dawned upon you that you might secure a far more valuable prize. You are so kind as to say that I don't value myself by the amount of my fortune; still I am aware that that is just what constitutes my value in the eyes of prudent persons, and of course my value was greatly enhanced in the eyes of one prudent person when I came into possession of this property, which Mr. Buswell wants so badly for building purposes. In July

last you had fully made up your mind to marry me and the Manor House; but at a critical moment your prudence deserted you; your head followed your heart, and lo and behold! you found yourself an engaged man. Now, after a more or less painful struggle, you are once more free. I congratulate you upon your freedom, and I should imagine that you are likely to retain it."

Gilbert had turned white to the lips. He saw that there was but one chance for him, and he took it. "What you say sounds very like the truth," he answered boldly. "It would be easy to put it differently; but I have already told you that I did think myself in love with Kitty, and I confess that I am not altogether indifferent to money. I don't know who is. What then? Neither you nor I are sentimental; we know that friendship and sympathy wear better than love, and I think I may venture to say that we are suited to one another. You know the worst of me now. If you will marry me, Beatrice, you shall know the best of me. Believe me, you will not find me unworthy of you."

She turned her face slowly towards him. "Mr. Segrave," she said, in deliberate accents, "I would as soon marry a convict."

So for a few seconds they faced one another without speaking. It was Gilbert who first broke the silence. "You have deceived me intentionally from first to last, then?" he exclaimed.

She inclined her head slightly in token of assent.

"But why?—why?" he burst out excitedly. "What have I ever done to you that you should treat me

with such cold-blooded cruelty? You have made me act like a scoundrel—for I have acted like a scoundrel; there is no use in denying it now—you have probably lost me my election; I don't see how I can even go on living in my own house after this. And all for what? To gratify your miserable vanity?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Segrave; not for that reason. I beg you to believe that I am not proud of my conquest. Quite the contrary; for if you have acted like a scoundrel, as you certainly have, my conduct has not been above reproach; and if you lose your election, I have lost more. I have lost friends who will never come back to me, while you, I dare say, will find your way into the House of Commons one of these days. As for cruelty, you are hardly the right person to complain of that. I say nothing about Kitty Greenwood, who will live to thank you for deserting her, though probably she will never thank me for having saddled myself with a rather repulsive task in order to bring about her desertion; but you must have taken me for a curiously dense observer if you thought I did not understand what your treatment of your brother has been. You cheated him out of his estate; you allowed him to go off and work for his living, knowing perfectly well that he was no more capable of taking care of himself than an infant; you did not care what became of him; you would have let him die of hunger—I believe he actually would have died of hunger if I had not bought this property from him in the nick of time! And then you have the face to accuse me of cruelty because I have managed to give you a taste—a very little taste—of the punishment that you de-

serve! After all, you are indebted to me; for you would have led a wretched life if you had been allowed to carry out your engagement; though I acknowledge that it was not for your sake that I put an end to it."

"Do you really mean that you wove this intricate and not very creditable plot out of sheer good-will to Miss Greenwood?"

She inclined her head again. "Why not?"

"The motive doesn't appear to me to be quite sufficiently powerful, that is all. I think there must have been another motive; I think I might even go so far as to form a guess at it."

She rose and stood looking at him scornfully. "I had no other motive," she said. "I do not in the least know what you are alluding to."

"No? And yet I thought that you revealed it pretty distinctly just now. I did not answer your accusations about Brian, it was hardly worth while. When a lady takes such an interest in any man as to put herself in very equivocal positions for the sake of avenging his supposed wrongs, it seldom is worth while to point out to her that she is talking nonsense about him. Well, Miss Huntley, I hope Brian will be grateful to you, but somehow or other, I scarcely think that he will, or that he will particularly enjoy the spectacle of my disgrace. He has such old-fashioned notions of morality, you know."

It almost gave him back his self-complacency to see her colour and flinch. "Good-bye, Miss Huntley," he said; "you have contrived to do a great deal of mischief and no earthly good, that I can discover, either to

yourself or to anybody else. One piece of advice I will make so bold as to offer to you, and that is, that you should refrain from giving to any one else the explanation which you have just vouchsafed to me. Because I really do not think that in all England you will find a human being quite credulous enough to believe in it."

She made no answer, and he left her without another word.

CHAPTER XIX.

HOME-SICKNESS.

IF Phipps had not been a very good-natured little man in the main, he might have been vexed to find how universally the success of *The King's Veto* was attributed to his partner. A large proportion of his large acquaintance begged to be introduced to Brian; indiscriminating persons congratulated him, not upon being the author of a piece which promised to be the greatest hit of recent years, but upon his insight in having associated himself with a hitherto unknown genius; the newspapers, after awarding him a line or two of approbation, went on to devote quite a generous share of their valuable space to pointing out that in Mr. Segrave had arisen a musical star which might very probably prove to be of the first magnitude.

"You're new, my dear fellow," the experienced Phipps remarked, "and the London public of the nineteenth century resembles the Athenian public of the first in some respects. They can't find words to express their admiration of you, you see, while they think

they have done enough for your humble servant by saying that 'Mr. Phipps is as amusing as usual,' or something of that sort. As if it was easy to be as amusing as usual! Never mind, I'm not jealous, and I'll go shares with you in another opera as soon as you like."

This offer was made to Brian only a few days after the memorable evening which has been described; yet it was not the first offer of the kind which had reached him. From all quarters he received intimations that he might, if he pleased, render his career a lucrative one. His old friend, Mr. Berners, the musical publisher, called upon him to say that a brisk demand had already sprung up for those despised compositions which had so long lain unheeded on the shelves, and that if Mr. Segrave had any unconsidered trifle by him in the way of a ballad, suitable for voices of ordinary compass, he could engage to dispose of it upon profitable terms. "The ballad, sir, is not the highest expression of musical art; but some of the greatest composers, as you are aware, have not disdained it. And it pays. To many composers money is an object. I don't, of course, mean to say that it is so in your case, sir."

Brian, after a moment's hesitation, replied that money was more or less of an object in his case, and that he would willingly occupy some of his leisure hours in the manner suggested. The truth was that he did not just then feel as if he cared very much about making money, but he was anxious for work, and hardly equal to work of an ambitious description. Work, so far as he could see, would have to be the one object and pleasure of his life. There was nothing else to look forward to, and nothing else that he could bear to

think about. Of Beatrice he was determined to think no more; she was dead to him, and even worse than dead, since the very memory of past days must always be bitter to him now, instead of sweet. But it is scarcely necessary to add that he was quite powerless to carry out his determination and that he thought of her every day, not to say every hour.

One morning he received a letter from Monckton, which he read with interest, but which contained no reference to Miss Huntley. In an hastily added postscript, however, he found some not unexpected news. "I have just heard," Monckton wrote, "that the engagement between your brother and Miss Greenwood has been broken off by her wish. I hardly know whether this will be as little of a surprise to you as it is to me; I can't say that, all things considered, it seems to me to be a matter for regret."

"He takes it pretty coolly," muttered Brian; "but I suppose he wouldn't say what he thinks about it to me anyhow."

For his own part, he did not find himself able to take this fulfilment of his forebodings as coolly as he could have wished. All through that day and the next he was restless and excited, eager to know the worst, wondering whether Beatrice would take formal possession of her captive at once or not, and possessed by a feverish and impotent longing to save her from her fate. "Was there nothing to be done?" he asked himself again and again, and could only answer that certainly there was nothing to be done by him. He might think as badly of her as he pleased, but he knew well enough that she could not have played the part that

she had played without deep humiliation, and it was not to be supposed that she would go through such humiliation for nothing. No; she would take her own way; she would marry Gilbert for better or for worse; the circumstances under which she had done so would soon be forgotten; the ancient glories of Beckton would be revived; its owner would become an important personage in the county; the poor old Manor House would probably be sold and razed to the ground after all.

This last thought was singularly distasteful to Brian. He regretted with all his heart now that he had ever parted with the place. If only he could have waited a few months longer there would have been no need for him to do so, nor would he have had to acknowledge that he, as well as Gilbert, had rendered all the sacrifices of his father's life vain. Turning these things over in his mind, he remembered all of a sudden that the step which he had taken was, perhaps, not irrevocable. He was in a fair way towards earning an income quite large enough for a bachelor's modest wants; the purchase-money which he had received from Beatrice was still intact; it would not make much difference either to her or to Gilbert whether he or Mr. Buswell became the owner of a property which they no longer required. Nay, they would surely prefer having a non-resident neighbour at their gates to being brought within hail of half-a-dozen denizens of brand-new villas. At all events, it could do no harm if he were to go down to Kings-cliff and sound them upon the subject.

Now, it is superfluous to assert—because everybody must be aware of it—that it is within the capacity of the most single-minded of men to take himself in, upon

occasion, with the most transparent of self-deceptions; and when Brian began to make preparations for a flying visit to his native place he was fully persuaded that he had a simple and definite purpose in so doing. It did not strike him that it was somewhat premature to propose a transaction contingent in its nature upon circumstances which had not yet arisen; nor did he reflect that, in any case, the proposal in question could be made with more propriety and less awkwardness by his lawyers than by himself. He was quite sure that he did not want to see his brother, and equally sure that it would be most painful to him to meet Beatrice, should he be called upon to face that ordeal. However, he thought it would be pleasant to have a chat with Monckton; added to which, he fancied that it might relieve his weary heart and brain to escape for a day or two from the bricks and mortar of London, which he had always hated, and to look once more upon the quiet woods of Beckton, upon the old grey house and the red cliffs, and the open, rolling sea. In truth, he was suffering from a sharp access of homesickness, which, like many other maladies, is apt to attack a man when he is down. If any incentives beyond these impelled him westward he was unconscious of them and to be sure they were vague enough to be ignored.

It was early on a cold and cheerless November morning that he started from Paddington, and as the train whirled him out from the smoke-clouds which hung over the city he was fain to admit that the country at that season of the year is not much better adapted to raise the spirits of a dejected mortal than St. James's

Street. The trees were bare, or nearly so; there was a motionless leaden sky overhead; it had been raining for some days, and round about Slough and Windsor the meadows were under water. Nor was any improvement perceptible lower down the line. Swindon, Bath, and Bristol had the forlorn, dirty, dripping appearance which only English towns can assume. English landscapes can stand grey weather better than most—there is nothing even in Lincolnshire to compare for utter, hopeless melancholy to certain parts of France—but the stunted houses, the slate roofs, and the dull red bricks of our cities have, under some atmospheric conditions, a lugubriousness which causes the heart of the beholder to sink within him.

But towards midday, by which time the express had rushed past Taunton, signs of a change became perceptible. The level canopy of cloud seemed to have risen a little higher; here and there it had streaks of a pearly tint, and these, gradually spreading, opened out into rifts through which rays of pale sunlight found their way, and even a suggestion of blue sky could be detected. It seemed that the west country was about to show evidence in support of the claim often put forward on its behalf, but not very often substantiated, that it possesses a separate weather system. After Exeter there was no more question of rain or gloom. The sun was shining brightly upon the low hills; the broad estuary was covered with dancing, glittering wavelets; it was pleasant to let down the window and inhale the fresh breeze which swept in from the sea.

“ ‘Twas autumn, and sunshine arose on the way
To the home of my fathers, that welcomed me back,’ ”

muttered Brian to himself. Well, the home of his fathers was not likely to give him much of a welcome, but he was glad to see the dear old country again, and glad that it should chance to smile upon him. He could not help being influenced in some degree by the weather; he could not help feeling as if he had awoke from some brooding nightmare, and as if, in spite of all, the world was not really the deplorable place that he had imagined it. He had a vision of Beatrice meeting him on the heights near the Manor House, looking at him with those clear eyes which surely could never belong to a traitress, and telling him that it was all a mistake—that she had only been putting his faith to the test, that she had never played Kitty Greenwood false, and that she had no more intention of marrying Gilbert than she had of marrying Stapleford.

But this, of course, was only a day-dream, and a sufficiently absurd one. He returned to actualities when he stepped out to join the short branch line to Kings-cliff which Sir Brian had been wont to abuse in old days, and now he began to dread a possible encounter with some acquaintance and to wish that he had taken the afternoon express, so as to arrive under cover of darkness. It was a relief to him to find the familiar little platform tenanted only by porters and newsboys. He gave his portmanteau to one of the former, hurried out of the station to avoid meeting the station-master, and jumping into a closed fly told the man to drive to the Royal Hotel. He reached his destination without having been recognised by any of the passers-by; but there was no escaping the cordiality of the landlord and landlady, who were loud in their manifestations of

joy, and did not fail to add thereto some expression of surprise that Mr. Brian, after his long absence, was not bound for Beckton.

"I shall only be here for a couple of nights," Brian explained, "and I have one or two things to do. It will be more convenient for me to be in the town for this short time."

To which they both replied, "To be sure it will, sir—yes, to be sure;" and looked as if they didn't believe a word of it.

However, they added that, since they were to have the honour of sheltering him under their poor roof, they would do their best to content him, and the large first-floor sitting-room was vacant—"same as Sir John Pollington and her ladyship had when they was here in the summer, sir, and was pleased to say as everything was most comfortable."

Brian had not the heart to grieve them by replying that he had no need for a sitting-room. He knew that to them it would seem a truly lamentable thing that a Segrave of Beckton should eat his meals in the coffee-room like a commercial traveller, and he did not wish them to pity him more than they could help. So he submitted to be installed in the state apartment, with its mahogany sideboards, its horsehair sofas, and its prints representing the Queen's coronation, the funeral of the Duke of Wellington, and other national events; and while he was eating his luncheon Mr. Petherick, the landlord, came in, ostensibly to ask whether he required anything, but in reality, of course, to find out what had brought him to Kingscliff.

Mr. Petherick walked to the window, drew up the

blind, and observed that it was wonderful weather for the time of year. Also that a gentleman as had come down with his family for the winter, had passed the remark to him that a many people lost their lives every year by running off to Italy and such-like places, where they didn't get no 'ome comforts, when they might have just as fine a climate within five hours of London. "They tell me, sir," he added, "that we're to have the fullest season this winter as has ever been known. That is, as soon as we get done with these blessed elections, which don't do no good to nobody."

"But I suppose elections are good for trade," Brian remarked.

"Why, no, sir; not nowadays. The law is that stringent a man don't hardly dare to stand any one a glass of ale; and both sides is keeping a precious sharp look out, as I understand. It'll be a close thing, a *very* close thing; and there's been a deal of feelin' got up of late, as I dare say you've heard, sir."

"I haven't heard much about it," answered Brian.

"Well, sir," resumed Mr. Petherick, advancing to the table and speaking in a more confidential tone, "I believe Admiral Greenwood he don't mean that it should influence him, and quite right, I said, though a Tory myself and making no secret of it, whether it costs me custom or whether it don't. When Mr. Giles come here, I says to him right out, 'My vote 'll be for the Tory candidate, sir,' I says; 'but I wish you was the Radical and the Squire on our side, like his father before him.' Ah, well, Mr. Brian, times is changed."

"They have changed for the better in some respects, I should think," said Brian.

"There's a many as think so, sir, and there's more money in the place than what there was, that's certain; but I don't know but what folks are gettin' a bit above theirselves with it all. There's Brooks the linen-draper can't be content to live above his shop no longer, but buys himself one of them new houses of Mr. Buswell's, and calls it Balmoral, if you please! 'Well, Mr. Brooks,' I says to him on Sunday last, 'I suppose we shall have to address your daughters as their Royal 'Ighnesses now.' I'm gettin' to be an old man, Mr. Brian, and I like the old times and the old ways best. I'd rather have seen you at the Manor House than that there young lady, though I don't deny as she's liberal to the poor. Maybe she won't be there long, though. They do say as the Squire—but I didn't ought to repeat all this foolish talk. Should you be wanting a carriage to drive you up to Beckton this afternoon, sir?"

"No, thank you, I would rather walk," answered Brian. "And, indeed, it is time for me to start," he added, glancing at his watch and getting up.

The landlord had not got much out of him, but, on the other hand, he had got rather more than he wanted out of the landlord. It appeared, then, that Gilbert had not even thought it worth while to disguise his intentions, and that the probability of his shortly becoming affianced to the beautiful heiress was already discussed at the bars of public-houses! In small places like Kingscliff such things are always known and discussed; yet Brian hated to think that it was so—hated also the thought of meeting his brother. He began to see how much better it would have been to make his

proposition by letter than by word of mouth; but it was too late to think of that now.

He walked briskly through the town, looking neither to right nor left, and reached the open country without having been accosted by anybody. When he had mounted some distance up the hillside, and felt tolerably safe from intrusion, he paused and looked back at the town, in the aspect of which one short year had indeed, as Mr. Petherick had declared, worked many changes. The works of Buswell were conspicuous everywhere, save in the fishermen's quarter, which presumably he had not yet dared to invade. From the point where Brian stood he could see stonemasons and bricklayers busy on the land to which his father had clung with such obstinate tenacity; the whole of it was marked out into lots; in one place a huge wooden notice-board had been set up, bearing the inscription of "Site for New Assembly Rooms." Brian turned his back upon all this with a sigh, and climbed higher.

Presently he took an abrupt turn inland, because he did not wish to pass too close to Beatrice's door, but after he had reached a certain pine-wood that he knew of he went his true course again until, on arriving at the outskirts of it, he could gaze down at the old red house which had been his for a short time, and which he hoped would be his again. It too was changed, and, for the matter of that, improved. The grounds round about it looked very trim and well cared for; new gates and fences had been erected; smoke was curling up from the chimneys, and every now and then the sound of stamping hoofs arose from the stable-

yard, where some invisible grooms were whistling and laughing over their work.

"I wonder whether I shall ever be rich enough to live in such a place?" thought Brian. "I wonder whether I should like to live there if I were rich enough? Not now, nor for a long time to come at all events. Perhaps some day, when all this has become an old story, and I have grown accustomed to thinking of her as my sister-in-law, I shan't mind."

He walked on with his head bent, and his hands behind his back, mentally rehearsing what he should say to his brother. He was not going to say much, and there should be no quarrelling, he was determined on that. He had come to Beckton to obtain, if possible, the refusal of a property which might shortly be for sale; he had not come to offer useless comments upon anybody's conduct. "Gilbert will know what my opinion of him must be," he thought. "I don't suppose he cares, and I'm not going to try and make him care. What would be the good?"

CHAPTER XX.

MITCHELL PUTS HIS OAR IN.

GILBERT, as he walked away from the Manor House after saying his last word to Beatrice, was by no means a happy man. It was true that a sudden inspiration had enabled him by that last word to discomfit his assailant, and quit the field without too much appearance of having been routed; but he had been routed, all the same, and that by means of a stratagem which any one with his wits about him would have detected from

the outset. For Miss Huntley had not played her part particularly well. She had betrayed her true feelings again and again by sarcasms which ought to have put him upon his guard; she had never conveyed to him the impression that she was in love with him, and he might have known that she would be most unlikely to marry him for any other reason. It would have enraged him to think what a fool he had been, if at the moment he had felt capable of rage; but he was too thoroughly beaten for that. He had staked everything upon this event, and the event had not come off. It was probable that he would lose the election now; it was almost certain that he would lose the few friends whom his questionable conduct towards his brother and his political apostacy had left him in the neighbourhood; in short, his scheme of life had failed, and he said to himself with the calmness of despair that there was nothing for it but to form a fresh one. This, however, was more easily said than done; and for the present he neither knew what was to become of him nor greatly cared. A sound drubbing, whether physical or moral, has just this advantage, that a man who has received it is seldom conscious of anything but a wish to retire into some quiet corner and rest. It is not until the next day that his bones begin to ache, and his spirit, if he has any, reasserts itself.

Gilbert plodded homewards, with the sea breaking far beneath him on his right hand, and the wind making a pleasant murmuring through the pine plantations on his left, and before him the expanse of rocky, heathery park-land of which not even the most ruthless modern reformer could wish to deprive Beckton, seeing

that it could never be made to do more than graze a scanty flock of sheep. On this sunny autumn afternoon it was serving the not altogether useless purpose of presenting charming outlines and stretches of varied colours to eyes appreciative of such things; but Gilbert's eyes, it must be owned, were not quick to discover the beauties of nature. What they did discover presently, with anything but gratification, was the figure of a tall, broad-shouldered man advancing from the direction of the house, and twirling his stick as he walked. "Bother the fellow!" muttered Gilbert to himself; "I thought we had seen the last of him. I suppose I can't give him the slip."

He certainly could not do that, for it was manifest that he had been already seen; so he summoned up an amiable smile, and as soon as the intruder was within hail, called out: "Hullo, Mitchell! Glad to see you back in these parts. What has brought you from the other end of the kingdom?"

Mitchell's response was a very discourteous one. He strode up to Gilbert until he almost touched him and then ejaculated, "You infernal scoundrel!"

Gilbert fell back a step, looking notes of interrogation.

"You want to know what I am here for, do you?" Mitchell went on grimly. "Well, I have much pleasure in telling you that I am here to settle accounts with you, my fine fellow. I suppose you thought it was a very safe thing to insult and desert a girl who had nobody at hand to protect her except an old man; but you see, you made a little mistake, for once in your life. I carried this ash-plant—and a good stout one it is

too—up to your house this afternoon with the intention of laying it over your shoulders, and that's what I am going to do this moment, with your permission."

Now this is not at all the right way to set about assaulting a man who retains the use of his limbs: and Mitchell, if determined to inflict condign punishment upon one who well deserved it, should have gone to work forthwith, instead of opening the attack by a volley of injurious epithets, like a hero of epic poetry. Gilbert, though not endowed with much bone or muscle, was as active as a cat, and had no notion of allowing himself to be thrashed if he could help it. He sprang upon Mitchell before the latter had finished speaking, gripped him by the wrist, wrenched his stick out of his hand, and sent it flying a dozen yards away. Then, without waiting to be shaken off, he relaxed his hold and leaped back.

"What a fool you are, Mitchell!" he exclaimed. "You don't know what you are talking about. I'll tell you the rights of the matter, if you like, though I really don't know why I should; for it is no business of yours."

"Pray don't trouble," returned Mitchell. "I know quite as much as I want to know, and you needn't think that I shall let you off. Now then, look out for yourself!"

The advice was hardly given quite soon enough to be acted upon; for simultaneously with its utterance Mitchell's left arm shot out straight from the shoulder, and down went Gilbert upon the flat of his back, with the soles of his boots turned up to the sky.

It takes a few moments for a man who has been knocked down to regain possession of his senses and

resume an upright attitude, in order to be knocked down a second time or to return the compliment; and during those few moments some one who, from the edge of the wood above, had been an amazed spectator of what had taken place, and who happened to be a swift runner, was able to reach the spot and confront the aggressor.

"Mitchell, you great idiot!" he panted, "what are you about? What's all this?"

"Tell you presently," answered Mitchell. "Get out of the way. I haven't half done yet."

Meanwhile Gilbert, who had ceased to see stars and had got upon his feet once more, had recognised his brother without any feelings of pleasure or gratitude. To do him justice he was not a physical coward, and, indeed, there can be few human beings who would tamely accept such an affront as he had just sustained.

"Stand aside and mind your own business, Brian," he said curtly; "I don't want your help."

"You'll have it, though, whether you want it or not," returned Brian tranquilly. "This isn't a fair fight, and I shan't let it go on."

"Who said it was a fight?" called out Mitchell. "I'm giving a licking to a blackguard who would have every bone in his skin broken if he got his deserts, and I'm not going to let him escape because he's your brother. That's your misfortune, and I can't help it."

"All right, old chap," said Brian; "you'll have to lick the pair of us then, that's all. Come on!"

But it was obviously out of the question to accept this invitation. Gilbert would doubtless decline to take part in a joint attack, and with Brian Mitchell

had no quarrel. Moreover, though this was a minor matter, it was probable that the licking of Brian might prove a task of some difficulty. The instrument of Nemesis had to descend to entreaty.

"Do get out of the light," he whispered. "Just for three minutes; only for three little minutes! I'll promise to drop my hands the moment time's up."

Brian, by way of reply, linked his arm firmly within Mitchell's and drew him away. There were loud expostulations both from Mitchell and from Gilbert; but affrays which have been interrupted by a parley are very seldom resumed, and the upshot of it was that Brian led Mitchell off towards Kingscliff, while Gilbert remained standing where he was. "Blessed are the peacemakers," but it is scarcely by thwarted belligerents that they can expect benedictions to be invoked upon their heads.

"Hang it all, Brian! I don't see what you wanted to put your oar in for," grumbled Mitchell, while he was being removed in safe custody. "Of course, he's your brother; but, after all, I shouldn't have killed him, and I think you'll allow that if ever a man has earned a hiding he has."

"I don't know about that; but everybody has a right to fair play, and it stands to reason that Gilbert couldn't have a chance against you," returned Brian. "You should hit a man of your own size. If I had been in his shoes it would have been another matter."

"I wish with all my heart that you had been—or rather, I wish he were as big as you. But really it isn't my fault that rascals are sometimes lightly built. I should have gone for him just the same if he had

been Goliath of Gath, and if he is no match for me I'm not to blame for that. I'm thankful to say that I didn't make him."

Brian made no rejoinder; he was not concerned to defend the rights of rascality in the abstract, or to set a premium upon low stature. But after he had conducted his companion to what seemed to be a safe distance from the scene of hostilities he remarked, "I think, as soon as you are a little bit cooler, Mitchell, you will be glad that I interrupted you when I did. You may even be rather sorry that I didn't come up a minute earlier."

"That I most certainly shall not," Mitchell declared. "I did give him one for himself, thank goodness! I don't think he'll care about showing his face to the electors for the next week."

"My dear Mitchell, it's all very fine to talk like that, but, as you said to me just now, I don't see what you wanted to put your oar in for. I suppose I can guess what your quarrel with Gilbert was, and now that we are alone, I don't mind admitting to you that I think he has behaved badly——"

"Badly! He has behaved like the consummate villain that he is! To throw over a girl who believed in him implicitly, and who has no natural protector to stand up for her, because the Admiral's fighting days are over, and——"

"Yes, I know; but the question is whether you are the proper person to put yourself forward as her champion. You know, Mitchell, ladies sometimes think that kind of thing a little bit officious. I hope Miss Greenwood will never hear of this, but if she ever does, you may depend upon it that she won't thank you. You

forget, or perhaps you haven't heard, that, as a matter of fact, it was she who threw Gilbert over."

"Oh, I know that well enough," answered Mitchell; "that's just the most disgraceful part of the whole business. Of course, she gave him his liberty when he let her see that he wanted to get rid of her; and the first thing that he did was to go down to the club with a long face and announce that she had broken off the engagement. I heard all about it from old Johnson. When I went away he promised to drop me a line from time to time and let me know how things were going on here; and the other day I had a letter from him telling me this pretty story. Well, Brian, you know how it used to be with me in the old days; everybody knew; I dare say most people know that I proposed to her in the summer and that she refused me. That was all right; I didn't expect anything else; and she was as kind as she could be about it. I stayed on here until I couldn't stand it any longer, because I thought I might have a chance of being of use to her in some way or other. I give you my word, sir, that for her sake I would have served that brother of yours to the best of my power, and I really did work pretty hard at electioneering for him. Well, do you know, Miss Huntley once prophesied to me that he would break her heart some day, and I said that if ever he did I would break his head. Now just put yourself in my place for a moment, if you can. Wasn't it natural that, when I got Johnson's letter, I should take the first train south and try to keep my word?"

"I dare say it was natural," said Brian; "but what good could it do?"

"Somebody must do these things," answered Mitchell decisively; "a fellow like that isn't to be allowed to have everything his own way. As it is, he has got off, thanks to you, with a little bit of a bump between his eyes, which I hope will turn yellow and black, but which won't trouble him long. Barring that slight inconvenience, he has triumphed all along the line. They tell me that he has been as good as accepted by Miss Huntley—a woman whom I must say that I don't understand—and I suppose he will live happily to the end of his days."

"Is it a fact that Miss Huntley has accepted him?" asked Brian carelessly.

"I believe so. I see now why she was always so anxious to encourage me, and kept on hinting mysteriously that your brother would not marry Miss Greenwood. Women haven't much sense of honour, it seems to me."

"Except one, I suppose."

"There are exceptions to every rule," replied Mitchell gravely. "Well, I wish Miss Huntley joy of him, I'm sure. No accounting for tastes, is there?"

"Do you mean to call upon the Greenwoods, now that you are here?" asked Brian, to change the subject.

Mitchell tilted his hat over his eyes and rubbed the back of his head doubtfully. "I hardly know," he answered. "I should like—but perhaps it would be better not, eh? What do you think?"

"If you ask me," said Brian, "I should advise you not to go near them. You would have to give some explanation of your being in Kingscliff, and you aren't quite as clever at deceiving your neighbours as—as

Miss Huntley seems to be. In my opinion the best thing you can do is to go back to Berwick-on-Tweed without any loss of time."

"Oh, but that's impossible, you know. One can't hit a man in the face and then run away."

"Gilbert will know where to find you, if he wants you, but the thing mustn't go any farther. You ought really to make him an apology; for everybody would tell you that you were entirely in the wrong. You may think this or that about him, but all you know for certain is that he is not going to marry Miss Greenwood because she won't marry him. You would have no right to knock a man down for that even if you had the right—which you have not—to make yourself Miss Greenwood's champion."

"If ever I apologise to him, I'll eat my hat!" Mitchell declared with much emphasis.

Brian did not insist upon the point, perceiving that it would be a pure waste of breath to do so; but after some further discussion, he prevailed upon his pugnacious friend to go away by the night mail. Mitchell could not but admit that a public scandal, though it might be unpleasant for Gilbert, would be scarcely less so for Kitty; moreover, he was secretly alarmed lest—as he was assured would be the case—she should resent his intermeddling with what did not concern him.

"But mind," was his last injunction to Brian, who accompanied him to the station to make sure of his departure, "if your brother would like to meet me quietly anywhere but here, he has only to say so and I shall be very much at his service with any weapon he chooses to name, from rifles down to walking-sticks."

CHAPTER XXI.

MONCKTON IS RATHER RUDE.

BRIAN spent a very long and very dreary evening all by himself at the Royal Hotel, his solitude only being invaded for a short time by Mr. Petherick, who was respectfully inquisitive, as before. Mr. Petherick hoped he had enjoyed his walk to Beckton, and had found Mr. Gilbert—"I should say the Squire; but there! I never can bring my tongue to it somehow"—pretty well. Might he make so bold as to ask whether Mr. Gilbert felt confident about the election? He did hear, but for his part he paid no heed to such talk, that some of the voters was uncommon bitter against the Squire, "through Miss Greenwood being so much the favourite, you see, sir, and well deserved, I'm sure." He trusted, however, that there would be no rioting or throwing of stones to bring discredit upon the place. "And what I always says is, there's two sides to every story, and we didn't ought to be in such a hurry to judge. And as for what has been spoke of in my hearing about the Manor House property, and Mr. Buswell being determined to get a hold of it, and the way as he thinks as it'll come into his hands—why, I should be ashamed to repeat such things to you, sir. No, sir, I really couldn't repeat 'em—not if you was to beg me to it."

Brian did not get rid of the exasperating man until all that Kingscliff was saying about his brother and Miss Huntley had been made known to him, with what Mr. Petherick doubtless imagined to be extreme delicacy. It was not much more than he already knew or suspected; he had not been able to credit Gilbert even

with the poor excuse of having transferred his affections from one lady to another; but it was painful to him that the truth about this sorry business should be made the subject of clumsy ridicule. Where money is concerned rustics are apt to be more cynical than dwellers in cities. It was easy to gather from Mr. Petherick's remarks that Miss Huntley was regarded by the Kingscliffians as a dupe, and that their indignation against Gilbert for his perfidy was tempered by a certain respect for his supposed astuteness. Not much sleep did Brian get in the huge four-poster which was said to have given satisfaction to Sir John Pollington, nor was it in at all a sanguine mood that he set forth to walk to Beckton on the following morning. If rumour was to be credited, he could hardly expect that Gilbert would look with favour upon his project of buying back the Manor House. However, the attempt had to be made; and in any case he must see his brother, if only to dissuade him from taking any measures of retaliation against the bellicose Mitchell.

He did not, as on the previous day, adopt a circuitous route, so that, after mounting the hill, he found himself close to St. Michael's Church and Vicarage, and, being there it seemed worth while to ask whether Monckton was at home. He had no intention of leaving Kingscliff without having shaken hands with his old friend: perhaps, too, he thought it would be bracing to exchange a few words with an honest man.

Monckton was not only at home but alone. As Brian entered his study he looked up from the papers with which his table was littered and exclaimed—

“This is better than I expected! I was wondering

when you meant to answer my letter; but I would rather see your face than your handwriting any day. Sit down, my dear fellow, and make yourself comfortable, and tell me all about your musical triumphs. I have only heard the most meagre details as yet."

"Oh, well," said Brian, seating himself sideways upon the table and swinging one of his long legs, "there isn't a great deal to tell. The opera succeeded, and it wasn't much of an opera, and—and that's about all, I think. At least, that isn't quite all, because I believe that my success is likely to be in a sort of way permanent. I mean it's open to me to do the same thing over again; and people who ought to know tell me that I shall make money without any difficulty now. That's something to be thankful for—as far as it goes."

"It goes a long way, Brian. Haven't you found that out yet?"

"Oh, yes; I know it's useful. In fact, I mean, if I can, to make use of it forthwith. Do you know why I came down here, Monckton? But you would never guess; and I expect you'll think me rather a fool when I tell you. I want to buy the Manor House back."

Monckton raised his eyebrows. "But surely Miss Huntley doesn't think of parting with it, does she?" he asked.

"I don't know; but I presume that she will after—well, after she is married. Monckton, old man, I am sure you know why Gilbert backed out of his engagement to poor little Kitty Greenwood; and you know, too, how I used to feel about Miss Huntley. I shall get over that by-and-by, I hope; I see now that she isn't what I thought she was, and I might have seen it

before if I hadn't chosen to keep my eyes shut. In the meantime I don't want to talk about her. As for the Manor House, I don't see why they should wish to keep the place, and I have scarcely spent a shilling of the money that I received for it. You know, Monckton, I never did like parting with the old house."

"Well, but assuming that Miss Huntley will be willing to sell, don't you think she may expect some return for what she has laid out on her property since she came into possession of it?"

Brian's face fell a little. "I didn't think of that," he confessed. "However, I suppose I might raise something on a mortgage, mightn't I?"

Monckton smiled and shook his head. "Brian," said he, "however long you may live, and whatever experiences you may pass through, you will remain sublimely indifferent to expenditure to the end of your days. I don't admire you for it; you ought to know better by this time."

"I don't think I'm as extravagant as I used to be," answered Brian meekly, "I have learnt all sorts of economical dodges, and I can live upon very little nowadays. Of course, it sounds insane to invest all one's capital in the purchase of a place that one can't afford to inhabit, but surely you wouldn't advise me to look on quietly while Buswell grabs the Manor House and tears it to pieces."

"I am not convinced that Mr. Buswell will be allowed to grab the Manor House: my impression is that Miss Huntley is as little anxious as you are to hand it over to him. Your brother might perhaps; but even if he marries Miss Huntley the Manor House won't belong

to him. There is such a thing as a Married Woman's Property Act, you must remember."

"If she marries Gilbert she will dispose of her property in any way that may please him," Brian declared confidently. "After all the sacrifices that she has made for him it isn't likely that she will care to dispute with him about comparative trifles."

"I should not have imagined her so superior to all compromise; but if it be so, you won't do much good by applying to her now, will you?"

"Oh, I didn't mean to apply to her directly," answered Brian; "I thought I would just see Gilbert and sound him upon the subject."

"According to you, that will be rather a waste of breath. Your view is that he is about to marry a very rich woman, therefore it would hardly be for the sake of the purchase-money that he would urge her to sell a part of her property to Mr. Buswell. Would it make you very angry, Brian, if I were to say that I doubt very much whether your purpose in coming here was to open negotiations for the recovery of the Manor House?"

"As if anything that you could say would make me angry, Monckton! But if you doubt my having come here for that, what in the world do you suppose that I have come for? It isn't over and above pleasant for me to be here just now, I can assure you."

"Why, I think," answered Monckton, smiling, "that you are here because you don't in the least believe all the rumours that have reached you, and because you want to satisfy yourself that they are untrue. And, between you and me, I don't believe them either."

"No wonder you don't!" sighed Brian. "I only wish I could disbelieve them, but, unfortunately, I can't. I heard from her own lips in London that——" He broke off suddenly and, pointing to the window, exclaimed, "Mercy upon us, look there!"

Monckton, who had risen just in time to catch a glimpse of Miss Huntley herself, advancing composedly towards the door, began to laugh at Brian's dismayed countenance.

"Don't be so alarmed," said he; "she is not likely to come in, and if she does she won't eat you."

But Brian had already clutched his hat, and was preparing for flight. "I can't meet her, Monckton," he said hurriedly; "I'll slip out by the back way. Good-bye for the present; we shall meet again before I leave, I hope." And without more ado he took to his heels.

The smile had not quite faded from Monckton's face when Miss Huntley was announced. She looked a little embarrassed and also rather cross.

"Am I violating etiquette?" she asked. "I suppose I am; but it can't be helped. I went to church, hoping to catch you as you came out; but I found a tiresome little curate on duty, so, as I didn't want to have my walk for nothing, I proceeded here and demanded admission. Since you won't come and see me, I must come and see you."

"Please sit down," said Monckton. "I can't often find time for paying visits; but I need not say that I am quite at your service whenever you want me."

"I quite understand; that is a polite way of saying 'What is your business?' I won't keep you long, I only wish to ask you one or two questions. First of all, I

should like you to tell me—and I know you will answer honestly—what you think of the way in which I have been turning things topsy-turvy this autumn.”

“I am not sure that I am quite in a position to judge,” replied Monckton, “but as far as I can understand your intentions, they have been good. I must confess that your way of carrying them out seems to me to have been both wrong and foolish.”

She drew a long breath. “Well,” she said, “I am glad that you give me credit for good intentions, at any rate. You are the first person who has had the common intelligence to see that much, and I dare say you will be the last. Naturally you wouldn’t approve of my method, but really, if you will think of it, no other method was open to me, and it has at least the merit of having been completely successful.”

“Has it?”

“Well, hasn’t it? I have saved Kitty Greenwood from binding herself for life to a man who is, upon the whole, the most despicable specimen of humanity that I have ever encountered.”

“Yes, that is your opinion of him, only it wouldn’t have been hers if she had married him. Nobody likes and respects Miss Greenwood more than I do; but I don’t think she possesses much insight into character, and I fancy that her husband’s faults would have to be very conspicuous indeed before she could be made to recognise them. I will admit that I am glad she is not going to marry him; nevertheless, I am not in the least sure that he would have made her unhappy. A nice nest of hornets the world would become if we all insisted upon choosing our friends’ husbands and wives for them.”

"There is no danger of such a catastrophe. Most people are a great deal too selfish to lay themselves open to abuse and slander for the sake of their friends. Besides, once does not make a rule, and I shall always think that in this particular instance interference of any kind was justifiable. How you can say that Kitty would have had even a chance of being happy with that wretch passes my comprehension."

"I shouldn't say it if I didn't think it. You see, Miss Huntley, in my trade it is necessary to study human nature, and after a time one gets to understand the meaning of certain common symptoms. Now, I should never dream of classing this man Segrave among the hopeless cases—if, indeed, there be any hopeless cases. I believe that a good wife might have done much for him; for he is still young, he is quite capable of shame, and, from what I have seen, I doubt whether his efforts at humbugging himself have been very successful."

"See what comes of looking at things from a professional point of view! You speak quite cheerfully of sacrificing the good wife; you are like those doctors who don't mind torturing hundreds of animals upon the off chance of prolonging one or two, probably worthless, human lives. I don't know, I'm sure, whether your interesting patient is capable of repentance or not; but I do know—and so do you—that he is capable of defrauding his brother, breaking his promises to his father, pretending to hold political opinions which he doesn't really hold, and sneaking out of a marriage engagement in the hope of making a more profitable one. You may possibly understand how to deal with such

cases better than I do; but it does seem to me that a good wholesome dose of punishment is the most promising thing to begin with. Meanwhile, I decline to be a party to any experiments in vivisection for his benefit."

Monckton smiled, but made no reply. If his studies of human nature had taught him nothing else, they had most likely convinced him that argument with irate ladies is seldom profitable.

Presently Beatrice went on, in a much more conciliatory tone, and even with a touch of timidity: "Mr. Monckton, I want you to do something for me, if you will; I want you to make peace between Kitty and me. I suppose she is very angry with me now—perhaps you know that she is?"

"I don't think she is best pleased with you," answered Monckton; "it would be rather strange if she were, wouldn't it?"

"Yes; but I always thought that as soon as she knew the truth she would understand, and now I am afraid—Well, I had better tell you that Mr. Segrave called upon me yesterday and did me the great honour to offer me his hand and heart. I made him the answer that you may imagine, and then, among other insolent and detestable things, he said that nobody would ever believe I had done all that I have done for Kitty's sake alone. I am afraid he is right; I am afraid it does sound a rather unlikely story."

"I am afraid it does," agreed Monckton.

"But you at least saw—for you said so—that my intentions were good, and if you were to explain that to Kitty, she would believe you."

"Perhaps she would. I suppose I may tell her with truth that you had no other object than her welfare?"

"You don't mean to imply that you doubt it, I hope?"

"Well, you know, Miss Huntley, you said something about punishment just now."

"Oh, I throw you in the punishment; far be it from me to deny that I thoroughly enjoyed punishing Mr. Segrave."

"But what for? Not for an offence which he had not yet committed and which you were trying to make him commit, I presume! I wouldn't for the world suggest such a thing to Miss Greenwood; but it may occur to her that you were more anxious to avenge Brian upon his brother than to rescue her. It is so easy to misinterpret motives! I can even imagine her turning your own surgical illustration against you, and I don't see what rejoinder you could make, except the one which I didn't make to you—namely, that it doesn't happen to apply. Such rejoinders are not very convincing."

"I am glad that you have said that, Mr. Monckton," cried Beatrice, rising and turning a face of calm fury upon her interlocutor; "I am very glad that you have said it, because it gives me an opportunity of telling you that I perfectly understand your insinuation (though I must own that you are the last person in the world from whom I should have expected to hear it), and that it is as devoid of any shadow of excuse as any insinuation can possibly be. Mr. Segrave was pleased to give utterance to it yesterday, and it would be just like him to repeat it to his brother, who, I am told, has

suddenly made his appearance here. Not for any man living would I go through one-tenth of the annoyance and humiliation that I have submitted to since the summer, and most certainly not for Mr. Brian Segrave, whom I used rather to like at one time, but whom I have since found to be not at all the sort of person whom one would care to make a friend of. I sincerely hope that I shall not see him while he is here."

"Perhaps you won't," observed Monckton quietly. "At all events, I can answer for it that he is not anxious to see you; for he was sitting with me just now, and the moment that he caught sight of you approaching he jumped up and fled through the back door. I don't know whether anything that he may hear from his brother will cause him to change his mind; but——"

"It is a matter of complete indifference to me whether he changes his mind or not," interrupted Beatrice; "but it might be a kindness on your part to warn him that anything which his brother says is pretty sure to be false. I must not take up your time any longer now."

"Have I offended you by what you call my insinuation?"

"Oh no, not at all. I think it was rather rude; but never mind; I don't mean to quarrel with you, Mr. Monckton, whatever you may say to me. Perhaps you will look in upon me some evening—after you have seen the Greenwoods."

"I will not fail to do so," answered Monckton. And after he had seen her to the door, he sat down in his arm-chair and laughed softly.

"So I am to tell Brian that there is no sort of

hope for him," thought he. "That was what she came here for, I suppose; because she does not really need my intervention to set matters straight between her and Miss Kitty. Well, I shall not deliver her message, though it would serve her right if I did. She really has behaved in a most inexcusable manner; and yet she was perfectly sincere, I am sure. There is a determined self-reliance about her, too, which is rather fine in its way and only wants directing. What a time she must have had of it during the last three months, with everybody against her and her conscience not quite at ease, and probably with a strong suspicion that her own happiness was at stake! Yes; all things considered, Brian is a fortunate fellow."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE LAST STRAW.

FROM the earliest times even until now a man who has received a blow without avenging it has been held to be a man deserving, perhaps, of pity, but certainly of contempt. Under the somewhat anomalous social code which prevails in our own country at the present day, it may be safely asserted that there is one course, and only one for those who have been assaulted to pursue, and that is to hit their assailant back again as hard and as expeditiously as may be. Having done that they can wait with some measure of calmness for the decision of outsiders as to what it may behove them to do next. But should they fail to fulfil this essential condition, it is hardly possible for them to come out of the affair with credit. Apologies are all very well; but

the general, and surely the correct view of mankind is that when a blow has been struck the time for apologies has gone by. Now Gilbert, through no fault of his own, had been prevented from wiping out the affront put upon him by Mitchell; therefore it was not surprising that, when he rose in the morning, examined his face in the looking-glass, and found it adorned just above the bridge of the nose by a conspicuous red swelling, he should have heartily execrated his too-officious brother. "Confound the fellow!" he exclaimed; "what brought him here at that moment of all others? And what did he want to take my part for? He ought to have been glad to see me thrashed; he ought to have enjoyed it. If he must needs interfere, why couldn't he wait at least another minute? But Brian always was a perfect fool!"

His reflections, as he proceeded with his toilet, were of a most unenviable character. With all the will in the world to chastise Mitchell, he did not see how the thing was to be accomplished. He dreaded scandal; he dreaded ridicule; he saw plainly enough that the utmost that he could hope for was to extort some expression of penitence for an act of unprovoked aggression. Mitchell, if brought to book, would probably have to admit that his attack was in no way justified by the circumstances; but would it be advisable to bring Mitchell to book? That was the question, and it was rather an awkward one. Gilbert had not been able to make an affirmative reply to it when he went downstairs, uncomfortably conscious of his bruised forehead. If the servants did not exchange significant grins as he passed them, he thought they did. After breakfast he

shut himself up in his study and was very miserable. During the past twenty-four hours Fate had treated him so cruelly that it seemed as if things could hardly be worse with him; and yet, of course, they might be worse. The meeting of electors which he had promised to address on the morrow might hoot him, for instance, and some of them would assuredly want to know how he had come by that ugly mark upon his brow. Any man may tumble downstairs or hit his head against a tree; these are accidents to which the best and soberest of us are liable; but, unfortunately, a censorious world is slow to believe in them.

"Shall I be taken ill, or shall I brazen it out?" thought Gilbert. "After all, it is best not to show the white feather, and I can't possibly remain in seclusion for the next ten days. Anyhow, I won't see a soul to-day, unless Brian comes."

He rose from his chair, intending to give instructions to that effect. But he was just a minute too late; for while his hand was still on the bell the door was opened and Mr. Buswell was announced.

Buswell entered the room slowly, mopping his forehead with his handkerchief as he advanced, although the day was not a warm one.

"Good morning, Mr. Segrave—how do you do, sir?" said he.

He was, perhaps, the very last man in Kingscliff whom Gilbert would have chosen to receive at that particular juncture. There, however, he was, and there was nothing for it but to make the best of him. Gilbert assumed as cordial a manner as he could, placed a

chair for his unwelcome visitor, seated himself with his back to the light, and said cheerfully—

“Well, Mr. Buswell, what is the news?”

“The noos, sir,” replied Mr. Buswell, “is not what I could wish it to be. Some of it’s no noos to you and bad noos for me; some of it’s t’other way on; none of it’s just what you could call pleasant for either of us. To begin with, it’s known all over the town that you’ve broke off your marriage, sir.”

“It is quite true that the marriage which was to have taken place between me and Miss Greenwood will not now take place,” answered Gilbert; “but that is a private matter and has nothing to do with the election. Of course, when I asked you what the news was, it was to the election prospects that I referred.”

“Nothing to do with the election!” echoed Buswell. “Bless your ’eart, it has everything to do with it! Why, if you heard the things said that I heard yesterday—but you’ll hear ’em soon enough. The fact of the matter is, Mr. Segrave, that you’ve played your cards uncommon badly. From the very beginning I told you, ‘Get ’old of the Manor ’Ouse and you’ll win ’and over ’and;’ but you wouldn’t listen to me, and what was the consequence? Why, that you lost a couple o’ ’undred votes straight off. I can’t put it at no less. Now, with a man like Giles against you, it was no joke to lose that number of votes; but to quarrel on the very eve of the election with a young lady who has done more for you by canvassing in certain quarters of the town than ever I could have done—well, all I can say is it looks to me like the act of a loonatic! I make no observation of my own, but the pop’lar opinion is

that your behaviour to that young lady has been atrocious, sir."

"Mr. Buswell," said Gilbert, with some dignity, "please to understand, once for all, that I cannot allow my private affairs to be made the subject of public discussion."

"Ah! but you can't help it, you see," returned Buswell. "A public man, Mr. Segrave, has no private affairs." And as if to illustrate his dictum, Mr. Buswell, who had been staring fixedly at his entertainer during the last few minutes, went on, "You've got a nasty bump right in the middle of your forehead, I see. What have you been doing to yourself? Not been running up against anybody's fist, I 'ope."

Gilbert ground his teeth, but did not lose his temper. "I met with a slight accident yesterday," he said, "and I am afraid I shall hardly be fit to show myself upon a platform for a day or two. In fact, I was thinking of asking you whether our meeting for to-morrow might not be postponed."

"I dare say we can manage to get you excused from attending the meeting," replied Mr. Buswell, with a short laugh. "So you met with an accident, did you? Well, well, accidents will 'appen in the best reg'lated families. Your brother arrived yesterday, I'm told. Now, if there's been anything in the natur' of a fracas between you and 'im——"

"There has been nothing of the kind," interrupted Gilbert, "and you must excuse my adding that that is a very impertinent suggestion."

"No offence, sir; we're all of us liable to have turbulent relatives, and a cousin of my own was in the

county gaol not so many years ago. But I'm glad I was mistaken in my little conjectur', because any such episode at a time like this would perdooce a painful impression. Not, to be sure, that you could stand much lower in the public estimation than you do already. As I was saying just now, pop'lar opinion is very adverse to you, sir; and then it's openly asserted—mind, I don't make myself responsible for the truth of the assertion—that you've been making up to our friend Miss 'Untley ever since she bought the Manor 'Ouse property from your brother. I suppose if that has been said to me once, it has been said a 'undred times; and what's the good of my answering that you're incapable of the action? Bless you! they only laugh at me, and say they know better."

"Perhaps I shall find out presently what you are driving at," remarked Gilbert. "In the meantime, allow me to tell you that this assumption of innocent probity on your part has a somewhat grotesque effect. I think you must be forgetting that there is nobody in the room but ourselves. Whether I have or have not been 'making up' to Miss Huntley, as you elegantly phrase it, there is something rather comical in your professing to think me incapable of the very action which you have been urging me to commit from the first day when you undertook to support my candidature."

"Not me, Mr. Segrave," returned Buswell emphatically. "I grant you that when you was a free man I advised you to marry Miss 'Untley, and very sound advice it was too; but you wouldn't be guided by me, and you went and engaged yourself to Miss Greenwood instead. Well and good; you were free to choose;

and the only remark I made to you on the subject was, that if Kingscliff didn't get the Manor 'Ouse estate through you, a fairish number of Kingscliff voters might think you wasn't the right man to represent 'em. Just what they *'ave* thought! Well, you might 'ave persuaded Miss 'Untley to sell, and if you had dropped a thousand or two over the transaction, that'd have been the price you'd have had to pay for your fancy; but——"

"Do you mean to tell me that that was what you advised?" interrupted Gilbert.

"Just so, sir; that and nothing else. Now look 'ere, Mr. Segrave; I'm a peaceable citizen, and as such I make it a rule to keep a civil tongue in my 'ead; but if any man accuses me of 'aving advised him to play a dirty trick, why, I don't see what I'm to do in justice to myself except give him the lie direct."

This only was wanting. After having been scornfully rejected by Beatrice, knocked down by Mitchell, and magnanimously preserved from a thrashing by Brian, to be called a liar by Mr. Buswell was no more than might have been expected. For one moment Gilbert thought of doing as he had been done by and reverting to the use of those simple weapons with which Nature has supplied us for our protection, but this was only a fleeting impulse. If he yielded to it and laid that fat old man sprawling upon the floor, he would only have to pick him up again, and subsequently explain to all whom it might concern—in other words, to all Kingscliff—why he had been guilty of such a startling breach of hospitality. Besides, as a matter of fact, Buswell was in the right. He had never in so many words given the counsel attributed to him; possibly he

had never even hinted at it. Gilbert could not feel quite sure upon the point, nor, in his present pass, could he feel it to be of any great importance.

"We won't quarrel over it, Mr. Buswell," he said mildly. "I may have misunderstood you; at any rate, since I am not going to marry Miss Huntley, there is no need to say anything about dirty tricks. It would be more to the purpose, perhaps, if you would tell me the object of your visit. Because I see that you have one."

Mr. Buswell's countenance exhibited some return of the embarrassment which had been visible upon it at the beginning of the interview. "Well, sir," he answered, "there was an informal meeting of the party last night, and in consequence of what took place there I have come, in an informal and personal capacity, to suggest to you that you should withdraw your candidature."

Gilbert had more than half suspected that this was coming. After remaining silent for a few seconds he asked, "And upon what grounds, Mr. Buswell, do you suggest that I should retire?"

"Upon any grounds that you may please to select, sir," answered Mr. Buswell, who, perhaps, had not anticipated so gentle a response. "I should put it upon 'ealth, if I was you; but I don't know as it matters much. Whatever excuse you may make will meet with no contradiction from me, you may depend."

"You don't quite understand me," said Gilbert. "I meant to ask why you have developed this sudden anxiety to get me off your hands?"

"Because we have ascertained that we can't return

you, sir—that's why. It's the fishermen and sailors that have cooked your goose. Miss Greenwood had got all their votes for you as safe as could be, and now they swear they'll vote for Giles to a man. If you doubt me, just go and ask 'em. On second thoughts, though, I shouldn't recommend you to do that. They're a rough lot, those fishermen, and you've put their backs up, Mr. Segrave, I can tell you. The bad feeling ain't confined to them either, though it's stronger in their quarter than in any other. From what I gathered yesterday, there are many staunch Liberals in other parts of the town who wouldn't give their votes for a Tory, but who would rather not go to the poll at all than give 'em for you."

Gilbert turned a shade paler. For a man who loved popularity this was not very agreeable news. "You are supplying me," he remarked, "with very strong arguments in favour of fighting the election out. To withdraw in the face of such an opposition as you describe would be tantamount to admitting that I had done something to deserve it."

"Maybe so," answered Mr. Buswell bluntly, "but we can't help that. We have the interests of the party to consider, and if you won't take a friendly 'int and retire voluntarily, we shall 'ave to request you to go in a more or less public manner."

"And if I decline to comply with that request?"

"You couldn't very well decline; but if you did, I believe we should start our own candidate, and the seat would go to Giles. You wouldn't be well advised in adopting that course, Mr. Segrave, take my word for it. It would be remembered against you that you had split

up the party, and that wouldn't 'elp your chance with another constituency at some future time. What's more, we should be obliged, in self-defence, to make known our reasons for chucking you overboard—which, I expect, you wouldn't like."

"You have found your candidate, I presume?" Gilbert observed, after a moment or two of troubled reflection.

"Well, yes; we 'ave. Believe me or not, as you like, Mr. Segrave, but I don't want to enter Parliament just at present. I can't well afford to give up the time to it, nor yet I don't see what I shall gain by it. But it has been put to me that, as nobody else could stand, with any chance of success, so late in the day, I didn't ought to 'old back."

Gilbert saw that he was beaten.

"I admire your public spirit, Mr. Buswell," said he, "and I feel that it ought not to be baulked of its legitimate reward. But if I retire in your favour, it must be distinctly understood that I retire of my own accord, not in consequence of any charges that may have been brought against me."

"I haven't brought no charges," Mr. Buswell declared. "I told you what the pop'lar opinion was, that's all."

"Very well; but I think I may fairly ask you to do something towards correcting that popular opinion."

Not a little to Gilbert's surprise, Mr. Buswell flatly declined to make this concession, alleging that he had not sufficient knowledge of the circumstances to justify him in accepting a brief on behalf of the accused, and adding that, according to his experience, facts were best left to speak for themselves. It seemed, indeed, that having gained the object of his visit, he was

anxious to bring it to an end without delay; nor did his host care to detain him. He left the house five minutes later, being authorised to state that an address to the electors, announcing Mr. Segrave's withdrawal, should be in the hands of the printers before nightfall.

CHAPTER XXIII.

VESTIGIA NULLA RETRORSUM.

FOR more than half an hour after Mr. Buswell had left him, Gilbert sat motionless before his writing-table, his head supported by his hand, and his eyes fixed upon vacancy. Then he rose, heaved a long sigh, and passing through the hall, where he picked up a hat, sauntered aimlessly out into the open air. The day was still and misty; the sea was as smooth as a lake; the faint yellow sunshine had no warmth in it, though it softened the grimness of the old grey mansion and lent a melancholy beauty to the coast-line. To Gilbert's eyes there was a great deal more of melancholy than of beauty in the scene. He walked slowly down to the lower bowling-green and then, facing about, looked up at the great, empty home of his ancestors, which met his gaze with a stolid, uncompromising indifference. A sudden loathing for the place and everything connected with it took possession of him; he would have shaken his fist at it if he had been sure that none of the housemaids were looking out from the bedrooms, which had to be swept and dusted, though no one ever occupied them. That dismal abode, it seemed to him, had been the source and origin of all his woes; it was for the sake of Beckton and the lands appertaining thereto that he had run the risk and incurred the

penalty of total shipwreck. If only he had been content to take his younger son's portion and make his way in the world like other younger sons, he would doubtless have married his own love in due season, he would have kept the friends of his youth, he would, perhaps, have got into Parliament without having to abase himself before Buswell, he would not have been tempted by Miss Huntley's gold, nor duped by her transparent guile.

Failure and detection are said to incite to remorse. That they promote a very speedy and sincere regret we may be sure; and Gilbert, when he thought of the events which had taken place since his father's death, wished from the bottom of his heart that he could make the world a year younger and begin all over again. It is, of course, never too late to mend; but amendment is not the same thing as a fresh start; what has been done cannot be undone, nor its consequences obliterated; so that, to practical men like Gilbert Segrave, sorrow over the unalterable past is apt to appear a fruitless and foolish emotion. Nevertheless, he sat down upon the grey granite balustrade and was very sorry—sorry for Kitty, sorry in some degree for Brian, but above all sorry for himself. Whether he had deserved ill-luck or not, there was no denying that he had been singularly unlucky; he had been deprived of everything that had hitherto made life sweet to him, and the future was so gloomy and so uncertain that it seemed hardly worth while to attempt any forecast of it.

After a time, some slight noise caused him to look up, and on doing so he became aware that his brother was standing close beside him.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" he said rather irritably. "You

seem to have acquired a new habit of springing suddenly out of the bowels of the earth."

"I beg your pardon if I startled you," said Brian; "I caught sight of you as I was crossing the park, so that I thought it wasn't necessary to go through the formality of ringing the bell and asking whether you were at home."

"Not in the least necessary; and I don't know why you should apologise for announcing yourself, now that I am alone and disengaged, as you see. You didn't scruple to do so yesterday, when I was neither the one nor the other."

"I was obliged to stop it, Gilbert. You would have done the same if you had seen a man twice my size pitching into me."

"How do you know that? I think I should at least have allowed you a chance of standing up for yourself. You meant well, I have no doubt; but you never in your life served me a worse turn than when you prevented me from hitting that man—who, by the way, isn't quite twice my size. Thanks to you, he will be able to tell everybody now that he knocked me down and that I have never called him to account for it."

"I don't think he will do that," said Brian; "he knows that you were ready enough to fight him, and that it is no fault of yours if he hasn't taken back a black eye to Berwick with him."

"Oh, he has gone back to Berwick, then?"

"Yes; I persuaded him to go. He told me to say that if you wanted him, you knew where he was to be found, or something to that effect. He was bound to say that much; but I hope you'll take no notice of his message, Gilbert."

Gilbert shrugged his shoulders, without replying.

"You see," Brian went on—for he could not help being aware that if he himself had been assaulted he would have allowed no man to talk him out of his right of retaliation, "you see, it isn't as if he doubted your pluck or as if he had attacked you in any public place. Nobody but ourselves knows, or ever will know, what occurred; and it is so much better to avoid a row which might get into the newspapers, and——"

"My dear fellow," interrupted Gilbert, "pray don't trouble yourself to provide me with excuses; I don't require your eloquent reasoning to convince me that I must pocket the insult. When one has been insulted all round one ceases to be particular as to a kick more or less. Perhaps I might have been feeling a shade less humiliated at the present moment if you had kindly allowed me to fight my own battle yesterday, that's all. It was bad luck for me that you should have turned up at that particular moment; but I am not in luck just now. Talking of that, why did you turn up, and where did you come from?"

"I'm staying at the Royal for a day or two," answered Brian, glad to change the subject. "I rather wanted to see you about something."

"You might have done me the honour to accept my humble hospitality; but never mind. What is it that you want to see me about?"

Brian fidgeted for a minute and then sat down on the balustrade beside his brother. "Gilbert," he began, "may I speak plainly to you?"

"Please avail yourself of that privilege. Others have done so pretty freely of late, and I am accustomed to it."

"Well, it's about the Manor House. I sold the place because I was so hard up at the time that I was driven into selling by sheer necessity; but since then I have made a little money, and am likely to make more; and— In short, I should like to get it back again if I could."

"Yes?" said Gilbert. "Well, I have some reason to think that your ambition may be gratified before very long. You have my best wishes at all events."

"You don't want to keep the property yourself then?" asked Brian, eagerly.

"Keep it? I haven't got it. If I had I should probably dispose of it to the highest bidder. Buswell, or yourself, as the case might be."

"Exactly; and I don't want it to go to Buswell. I know you don't feel as I do about these things; and I quite understand that it may be to your interest to conciliate Buswell; but after all, there is another side to the question. It wouldn't be quite pleasant to you to have a row of cheap villas run up so close to your gates, would it? And even if Buswell were disappointed, surely he wouldn't use his influence to prevent your being returned. He has had his own way in a good many matters, and I should think you might fairly represent to him that he couldn't expect to have it in everything."

"Buswell always gets what he wants. Whether the Manor House will prove an exception or not I really don't know; but let me remind you once more that the Manor House doesn't belong to me, but to Miss Huntley."

"Isn't that much the same thing?" asked Brian. "You said I might speak plainly."

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"I see," answered Gilbert, with a slight smile, "that you require to be posted up in the latest intelligence. You behold in me, my dear Brian, the victim of one of the simplest plots that ever was devised. You may have noticed, perhaps, that the simplest plots are usually the most successful. Clever people, like myself, are not on their guard against them. We flatter ourselves that when our neighbours want to make fools of us they will pay us the compliment of displaying a little ingenuity in their designs. If we wish to arrive at their motives we set to work to burrow scientifically beneath the surface; we are too sharp to waste our time in examining what stares us in the face. That is why I was ridiculously taken aback when Miss Huntley was so kind as to tell me that, upon the whole, she would rather marry a convict than me."

"Did she say that?" exclaimed Brian.

"She did indeed; and I must own that the expression seemed to me to be unwarrantably strong. However, it had the advantage of leaving me in no doubt as to her sentiments."

"But, then, why did she—?"

"Quite so. I appreciate the delicacy which restrains you from filling up the blank; but you would not have hurt my feelings very much if you had. I put the question to her at full length. I asked her why she had led me into behaving like a scoundrel, and in reply she politely gave me to understand that I had behaved like what I am. Consequently that, having a regard for Miss Greenwood, she considered any measures permissible which might result in saving Miss Greenwood from becoming my wife."

"That might be the truth, you know," observed

Brian, musingly; for at the moment he was thinking more of Beatrice than of his brother's reputation.

"It might; but as I am relieved from any obligation of extreme courtesy towards Miss Huntley, I will permit myself to say that I don't think it was."

"I can't imagine what other object she can have had," Brian declared.

"I suppose you can't. You will be able to imagine soon, though, if I am not very much mistaken. Do you know, Brian, I am fully persuaded in my own mind that before you are many months older you will have regained possession of the Manor House without having paid a penny for it. You don't understand? Perhaps that is because you are like me, and neglect to notice what lies before your nose. How was I to guess that she bought the Manor House with a secret intention of restoring it to its former owner some fine day? I thought she was ambitious; I thought she was anything rather than sentimental; I overlooked the fact that she is a woman."

"And do you really suppose," cried Brian, indignantly, "that I would accept such a gift if it were offered to me?"

Gilbert laughed. "Not by itself, perhaps," he answered; "but sometimes the whole is less than the half. Would you refuse the Manor House and all that it contains, including its mistress? If you would, your feelings must have undergone a change during the last twelvemonth; and it is only just to you to say that you are not changeable."

Brian wrinkled up his forehead and looked in a puzzled way at his brother, who looked back at him with a mixture of mockery and amusement which he was unable to interpret. "I suppose I am very dull

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and matter-of-fact," he said at length, "but I don't see the joke. Of course, you don't seriously mean that that offer will ever be made to me?"

"Well, hardly; it isn't usual, you know, for offers of that particular kind to be made by the lady; and free as Miss Huntley is from conventional prejudices, she will probably expect you to speak the first word. But I presume that you are equal to that effort."

Brian rose, paced up and down the grass for a few moments and then resumed his seat on the balustrade. He was not sure whether his brother was laughing at him or not; and he said so.

"I am not laughing at you," answered Gilbert; "I am not in a particular hilarious mood. If you insist upon unequivocal language, here it is for you. With or without reason, Miss Huntley is of opinion that I defrauded you of your rights by taking what my father's will gave me, and that I afterwards turned you out into the world to sink or swim, as the case may be. If she virulently detests me on that account, I suppose it is because she doesn't precisely detest you. She was determined to ruin me; and though she didn't adopt the most honourable method in the world of achieving that aim, she has been very fairly successful. Let us put it that I deserved to be ruined; that will help to remove any possible misgivings that you may feel as to her strict integrity. In sober earnest, Brian, all that she has done has been done for your sake."

"I think you are mistaken," said Brian, after a short pause.

"And I am sure that I am not. She betrayed herself yesterday in a way that there was no mistaking; though she protested—probably with more or less sin-

ing his affections upon the worthy and withdrawing them from the unworthy. He could be indignant enough with baseness and treachery; but no traitor would be likely to ask his pardon in vain. His habit of mind was not logical; he could not see that a man who is capable of certain ignoble actions must by that very fact be incapable of any real nobility. He asked no more of any offender than to say "I am sorry," nor wanted stronger support for the assertion than the offender's word. So he laid his hand upon his brother's shoulder and said:

"Gilbert, old fellow, this has been a bad job; but I don't think you meant to—to—I don't think you have been quite yourself, you know, of late. Can't we let bygones be bygones and start afresh?"

Gilbert glanced up at him with raised brows. "In what sense?" he inquired.

"I mean, wouldn't it be possible for you and Kitty to come together again?"

"Oh, dear, no! *vestigia nulla retrorsum*. I couldn't if I would, and I wouldn't if I could. If Miss Huntley was right in nothing else, she was right in saying that that marriage would have turned out unhappily. No, my dear Brian; there can be no fresh start of that kind for me; I'm not sure that there can be a fresh start of any kind. I shall go abroad, and then, after a time, I shall come back again; and then—well, I don't know what I shall do then; but I shan't inhabit Beckton any more. You and Miss Huntley had better buy the place; you shall have it at a reasonable figure."

This proposal to sell him a property which he still believed to be morally and equitably his own would once have struck Brian as the extremity of impudence;

but he had got past that phase of feeling. "Miss Huntley and I are not likely to make any joint purchases," he said hurriedly; "and Beckton mustn't be allowed to stand empty for years. Look here, Gilbert; I want to be friends with you again. We haven't been friends for a long time, and I know that has been principally my fault. There's no use in discussing what is over and done with; but we might agree to pass the sponge over it, might we not?"

Gilbert was a little touched, "What a stupid fellow you are, Brian!" said he, smiling. "You are always doing the wrong thing at the wrong time. Who ever heard of offering peace to an enemy just after he had had a crushing fall!"

"But you are not my enemy," said Brian.

"Am I not? Miss Huntley would tell you a different story. Well, never mind; Miss Huntley can't prevent our being friends for the next hour, anyhow. Come in and have some lunch, Brian. Who knows whether we shall ever sit down at the same table again, you and I?"

CHAPTER XXIV.

MOONLIGHT.

THE daylight was already fading when Brian started to walk back to Kingscliff. It was for Kingscliff that he was bound; but in order to reach that place he must of necessity pass the Manor House, and the question was whether he should or should not turn aside there. His ideas were a little confused after along talk with Gilbert; he had clean forgotten, for the time being, the business which had brought him down from London; he was conscious, too, of a certain light-hearted-

ness which self-examination showed to be not wholly due to joy at being reconciled with his brother. "Surely," he thought, "I can't be such a fool as to believe that she planned poor Gilbert's fiasco because she thought that he had behaved badly to me! Surely I can't be deluding myself into imagining that she cares for me because she has refused him!"

He was able to acquit himself of that culpable fatuity. As the result of further self-examination, he became convinced that what made him see a new and strange beauty in the familiar landscape, and caused him to draw the keen air into his lungs with a sense of refreshment and exhilaration which he certainly had not derived from it earlier in the day was by no means a wild hope for the unattainable, but the recovery of his lost ideal. True it was that Beatrice had fallen into some deplorable errors in judgment; but to err is human, and it is obvious that there is all the difference in the world between errors committed for the sake of others, and those which are the offspring of selfishness or indifference. If Miss Huntley had undertaken a task which must have been exceedingly distasteful to her and for which she must have known that she would never be thanked, did it not follow that, although her mode of operation might be condemned, she herself was entitled to the admiration which is the due of all disinterested blunderers, from Don Quixote downwards? One deprecates murder, but one applauds Charlotte Corday; and the splendid mendacity of the daughter of Danaüs has, as we know, conferred upon her a title of nobility for all time. Brian, reasoning thus, remembered to have said that he would be ashamed of himself if he continued to love a woman

who had acted as Miss Huntley had done; and now he felt ashamed of himself for having said so. What is the first duty of a man who is ashamed of having wronged his neighbour? Evidently to go and express contrition to the neighbour whom he has wronged.

So it came to pass that the sinking sun saw our hero walking with a brisk step up the avenue which leads to the Manor House. His heart was beating fast, but not with apprehension; he was eager to ask pardon, eager also to accord it. It did not occur to him that both request and boon might be disdained by a lady whom circumstances had bitterly incensed against him.

He was within a couple of hundred yards of the house when all of sudden he was brought face to face with her. Beatrice, who had remained indoors all the afternoon, had taken it into her head that a turn in the garden might relieve the nervous restlessness from which she was suffering; but she had not bargained for an encounter which had the effect of depriving her momentarily of her presence of mind; insomuch that Brian shook hands with her before she could stop him. However, this familiarity on his part reminded her of what was due to herself, and she said freezingly—

“You are on your way to call upon me, I suppose? I am sorry that I am just going out; but I think you will find Miss Joy at home.”

“Are you in a great hurry?” asked Brian, less discouraged by this unfriendly reception than she had intended him to be. “Perhaps you would let me walk a little way with you. I particularly want to say something to you, and I shall be going back to London to-morrow morning.”

She assumed an air of resignation. "I am not exactly in a hurry," she answered; "but, to tell you the truth, I am rather tired, and I did not mean to see any visitors to-day."

"I won't keep you long. I would go away at once; only it may be months before we meet again; and after what I heard from Gilbert this afternoon——"

"Excuse my interrupting you; but I think you ought to be cautioned that your brother's statements are not to be depended upon. If you have come here to repeat anything that he has told you about me you have come upon a very foolish errand, and I hope you will think better of it. One doesn't care to listen to falsehoods which are too malicious and too palpable to be worth contradicting."

Brian's heart sank a little. He could not mistake her meaning, nor had he permitted himself to hope that there could be any foundation for his brother's startling surmise; still it was not quite agreeable to him to hear it disposed of in that very contemptuous fashion. "Gilbert said nothing malicious about you," he answered humbly; "he told me that you had refused to marry him; and — and all that he said made me feel that I had no right to speak to you as I did the last time that I saw you in Park Lane. I wanted to ask you to forgive me, and let me take back my words."

"You are very kind; and, naturally, I can have no objection to your withdrawing any expression which you may feel bound to withdraw. At the same time, I don't quite see why you should do so. You knew me so little as to suppose that I should marry your

brother, which was a poor compliment to my taste, but hardly a reason for regarding me with righteous horror. What I understood you to condemn was my having taken advantage of his predatory instincts to persuade him into breaking with Kitty Greenwood; and I am just as guilty of that misdemeanour now as I was then."

"But it was out of kindness to her that you did it," broke in Brian eagerly. "I ought to have seen that at the time, and I am very sorry that I didn't see it. That is what I came here to say."

"Well," answered Beatrice, somewhat mollified, "I suppose I ought to thank you for taking so much trouble. But I must own that I should have felt more grateful if you had believed in my being disinterested from the first, instead of waiting to be convinced by facts."

"I was wrong; I acknowledge it. But—why didn't you tell me that I was wrong when I asked you?"

"I told you nothing but the truth; I wasn't bound to tell you the whole truth. Perhaps you wouldn't have believed it if I had. No one else believes it—not even Mr. Monckton—and I suppose no one ever will. Are you sure that you yourself believe it even now?"

"I firmly believe," answered Brian, "that your one wish from first to last has been to put a stop to what you thought would be an unhappy marriage; and I believe that you would never have taken this way of putting a stop to it if it hadn't seemed to you to be the only practicable one."

"Ah! you consider it very objectionable, then? So do I, for the matter of that. But it has succeeded."

"Yes," agreed Brian doubtfully, "it has succeeded."

During this colloquy they had been pacing slowly along, side by side, neither of them paying much attention to the direction in which they were walking. They now perforce came to a standstill, for they had reached the end of one of the paths which, winding through the shrubberies that surround the Manor House, leads to the brink of the cliff, and is terminated by a low wall and a semi-circular stone bench. The twilight was fast deepening into darkness; the full moon had risen above the headland beyond Beckton, and was shining, large and ruddy, through the mist; the sea was so calm that only a faint whisper of breaking water arose from the beach beneath.

"Do you think," asked Beatrice, turning suddenly towards her companion, "that I was right or wrong in this matter?"

"Don't ask me to say anything that may offend you," he replied. "I am going away in a few minutes, and if we ever meet after this it will probably be in London, where you won't have time to do more than speak a word or two to me. I don't want to offend you again at the last moment. And what, after all, can my opinion signify to you?"

"Not much, perhaps; still I wish to have it. You are less likely to offend me by speaking out than by keeping silence."

"Well, then, I can only say that I think you were wrong. You may have done Miss Greenwood a service, and I dare say you have; but in order to do her that service you have pretty nearly ruined Gilbert. You don't seem to have considered him at all."

"Oh yes, I did; I considered his case in all its

bearings, and I am very sure that he has got no more than his deserts."

"He is in worse trouble than you think for, perhaps. The simple truth is, that you have made the place too hot to hold him. He has had to give up his candidature, and he means to go abroad at once. Indeed, he says he shall never live here again."

"I am delighted to hear it," answered Beatrice remorselessly. "If you have nothing worse than that to reproach me with, I can accept your rebuke without losing my temper. Is that all?"

"Yes, that is all; except that I should like just to tell you how miserable it has made me to doubt you, and that I shall never doubt you again, and—and that I shall always love you as long as I live. You don't mind my saying that as my last word, do you?"

He held out his hand to her and, after a moment of hesitation, she took it silently.

It is quite possible that, if there had been no moon that night, the interview would have closed then and there; but the moon, as had been said, was at the full; and so it came to pass that Brian made an amazing discovery. What was it that he saw in Miss Huntley's face? He has never been able to answer satisfactorily, although he has since been subjected to a searching cross-examination on the point. It cannot have been only that there was an unmistakable glitter of tears on her eyelashes, for that of itself could hardly have been enough to warrant the conviction which he appears to have instantly formed.

"Beatrice!" he ejaculated.

She drew back, exclaiming, "No!—no!" and trying

to regain possession of the hand which he continued to hold.

But it is in vain that the tongue denies what the features have revealed; nor is a diffident suitor one whit less masterful than a bold one from the moment he sees victory within his grasp. Not five minutes had elapsed before Miss Huntley had been reduced from a position of commanding superiority to one of the humblest submission.

"Let me go, Brian!" she entreated; "it is most unfair to take advantage of what you were never meant to know. I can't do as you wish—how can I? Don't you see what horrid things people will say about me?"

"No, indeed I don't. Besides, who cares what they say?"

"Not you; that is very plain. But I do. I don't want it to be said that I was scheming and plotting for this all along—and after what I told Mr. Monckton only this morning too! Oh no; I cannot possibly do it! And don't you know that you will certainly be accused of having married an heiress for the sake of her money? Have you no shame?"

"Not an atom. The only person in the world whose opinion I value in the least at this moment is yourself. Tell me truly, Beatrice, when did you first begin to care for me?"

"I don't know; I can't get at my watch. I suppose about ten minutes ago. Well, if it was before that I was quite unconscious of it—almost unconscious, anyhow. Now, Brian, you know perfectly well that I fully intended to marry Stapleford, and if he had only had

the patience to wait until I had carried out my schemes down here, I would have married him."

"I don't believe it," answered Brian coolly.

"You are getting on, I must say! It isn't half an hour yet since you were ready to believe anything and everything that I told you. One thing you must and shall believe, or I will never speak to you again—it is a gross calumny to pretend that I tried to ruin your brother because he had tried to ruin you."

"I am quite sure it is," Brian declared.

"Not that that would have been anything more than strict justice. And now I suppose you will make me forgive him; it will be only one among the many bitter pills that I shall have to swallow. Oh, Brian, if you knew how glad I am to have found my master! Women ought never to be independent; I told you so long ago, and I am afraid I have done a good deal to prove it. You won't expect too much of me, will you?—or be disappointed when you find out, as, of course, you must soon, what I am?"

"I know already what you are," answered Brian confidently.

And he proceeded to make statements in support of his assertion, which may as well be omitted, since, to tell the truth, they were absurd in substance and hyperbolical in language. They did not, however, seem to displease Beatrice, for she protested against them, and laughed at them with every appearance of contentment, until Miss Joy, who had been prowling about the garden for some time past in search of her charge, suddenly and most indiscreetly emerged from behind a bush.

Miss Joy had one little foible; she liked to think that she could see farther through a brick wall than her neighbours. Therefore, although there probably was not at that moment a more astonished woman than she within the four seas, she displayed much presence of mind by observing calmly, "I expected this!"

"Oh, Matilda!" exclaimed Beatrice, starting up and enfolding her friend in a close embrace—possibly with a view to concealing her own cheeks,—“where do you think that you will go when you die? Nothing of this kind *could* have been foreseen by anybody!”

"It was foreseen by me," persisted Miss Joy in a muffled voice, "and you need not try to choke me, my dear, because you will not prevent my saying that it is what I have hoped and prayed for from the very first."

"Even when Stapleford stood so high in your favour, Miss Joy?" Brian could not help asking.

"Yes, Mr. Segrave, even then. And I challenge you to deny that at that very time I told you that in my opinion you were better suited to Beatrice than anybody else."

"I believe you said I might be, under certain non-existent conditions."

"Bother the conditions! Besides, they have come into existence. A great composer, who is a gentleman by birth, can't be classed below a penniless viscount. Well, young people, I hope you will be as happy as you deserve to be, which is saying a good deal. You will let an old woman come and stay with you sometimes, won't you?"

"You will live with us always, Matilda," returned

Beatrice decisively. "Brian, do you hear? Matilda is to live with us always, or the engagement is off."

Brian made the only reply that could be made; but Miss Joy nodded reassuringly at him over Beatrice's shoulder. She was neither young enough nor foolish enough to attempt what has never yet been attempted with success since the world began.

CHAPTER XXV.

CONCLUSION.

A CHANGE of candidates at the eleventh hour is apt to be disastrous to the political party whose interests are at stake; and this may perhaps account for the result of the Kingscliff election, which placed Mr. Giles at the head of the poll by a narrow majority. Buswell thinks otherwise. He says that he approached victory much more nearly than Gilbert Segrave would have done, and attributes his defeat simply and solely to the fact that he was unable to hold out any immediate prospect of improvement to the borough by the addition to it of the Manor House property. He still asserts that he means to have that property, sooner or later, and has no doubt but that he will get it; which shows a sanguine spirit on his part, seeing that Mr. and Mrs. Brian Segrave have taken up their permanent residence there. His contention, however, is that the force of circumstances will drive them some day to Beckton, which has remained untenanted since Gilbert's departure, and that they will not then continue blind to the necessities and deaf to the entreaties of an entire town. Meanwhile, he is doing the best that he can

for the said town and at the same time is not doing badly for himself. Quite recently he has received the honour of knighthood; nobody exactly knows why. But it has ceased to be necessary to assign reasons for the bestowal of these distinctions, and probably it is only due to Buswell's native modesty that he has not been made a baronet.

Brian and Beatrice were married at St. Michael's, one winter morning, quite quietly; that is to say, that not more than three hundred persons witnessed the ceremony. Indeed, it is not easy to be married quietly anywhere out of London. The bridegroom's brother was not present, being abroad at the time; but Mr. Phipps was good enough to undertake the duties of best man, and Sir Joseph Huntley gave away the bride.

Lady Clementina, though not enchanted with her sister-in-law's choice, was fain to submit to it and to acknowledge that of the two Segrave brothers, Brian was at least the more desirable. "I can't understand why you are marrying him, Beatrice," she said, with engaging frankness; "but I have given up trying to understand why you do anything. He tells me he is not a Radical, which is some comfort, and to do him justice, I don't think he is a fortune-hunter. Indeed, it is rather an unfortunate thing for him to have come into a fortune; for, of course, he will give up composing music now and will sink into obscurity."

Whether the latter part of this prediction will be fulfilled or not time alone can show: the first has not been and will not be. Brian will always compose for the pleasure of composing, and if he is not very ambitious, his wife has ambition enough for two.

Gilbert has not yet returned to England. He is visiting India and the Colonies, and will doubtless have a store of valuable information relating to some of our more troublesome dependencies to lay before the next House of Commons. Beatrice trusts that he will not hurry back. She will find it easier to give him a sisterly welcome, she thinks, if before he reaches home she has been able to bring her scheme to a successful termination by marrying Kitty to Mitchell. It is not at all unlikely that her hopes will be realised. At any rate, Kitty is once more her bosom friend, and she has induced Captain Mitchell to pay a long visit to the Manor House.

Brian doubted the wisdom of this course, urging that a little longer time should be allowed to the poor girl to forget her old love; but he was promptly and even scornfully overruled by Mrs. Segrave.

"Why, you goose!" she exclaimed, "she has been in love with Captain Mitchell all along; only she didn't know it. Now, my dear Brian, you really must not set up to be a judge of such matters—you, of all people! You, who couldn't so much as see that I was in love with you, without knowing it, for a year before you proposed to me!"

THE END.

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